

PERRY RHODAN



THE WORLD'S GREATEST SPACE FICTION SERIES



HUMANS KEEP OUT!

William Voltz

#143

Perry Rhodan

No. 143

Humans Keep Out!

*A planet shatters – and five Terrans reach
the forbidden station . . .*

William Voltz

It is the year 2114 by earthly reckoning. For Terrans, not quite 150 years have passed since the successful moon landing of a chemical rocket-the prelude to true space travel.

In cosmic terms, this was an incredibly short span of time. Nonetheless, under Perry Rhodan's leadership the Solar Imperium has managed to become one of the main pillars of galactic power.

Most of the races of the Milky Way already know it's better to have the Terrans as friends than enemies. After the Springers and the Aras, the galactic medical masters, others have also come to this realization, such as the Akons of the Blue System, and so since the 10th of September of 2113 an alliance between Terrans, the Arkonides and the Akons has been in effect-although this so-called Galactic Alliance has been resting on shaky foundations.

Because Perry Rhodan was not willing to reveal the secret of the transformation weapon the Terrans had wrestled from the bio-robots, the Blue System had retaliated by landing the "Agents of Destruction" on Terra. Only with the help of the Posbis had it been possible at the last moment to neutralize the invisible invasion.

However, if the Posbis are able to combat the Laurins, they must possess the necessary detection devices for making the unseen enemy visible to their eyes. At least this is what has been concluded in Terrania, and technical groups have been sent out to search for such a device.

But one such team of searchers lands on a world where it's a case of
HUMANS KEEP OUT!

The PERRY RHODAN series and characters were created by Walter Ernsting and Karl-Herbert Scheer.

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Original Title: “Fur Menschen verboten”

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This eText Edition, 2021

FOR 5 CASTAWAYS, “DOOMSDAY” BRINGS AN INHUMAN ORDEAL!

Perry Rhodan – the First Administrator’s hunch is a bridge to salvation.

Emmet Loden – a backslider with occasional flashes of genius.

Dr. John Bigman – leader of the lost, who proves that “bigness” is not a matter of size.

Ron Shawlee, Jens Bergmann and Albright – other members of the search team.

Schopproit – A brave little Snoof.

Tosnik – Translated perhaps as “fat face”.

Sorenzeych – Pack leader of the younger Snoofs.

Plusenkest – The Old One among the slope dwellers.

Atlan – The Imperator finds that “too much of a good thing” is very good indeed!

Jefe Claudrin – Cmdr of the *THEODORICH*.

Dr. Bryant – Chief of research project on Surprise.

Commodore Felipe Imarez – Cmdr of fleet task force in the Outside System.

Maj. Tschu-Kameh – Cmdr of Terran rescue ship.

Bronston and Walsh – Other fleet officers.

1.

SURPRISE ENDING

Originally, Emmet Loden had planned on being in the vicinity of La Seyne during March of the year 2114. He knew of a little inlet there, apart from the regular bathing beaches which would be overcrowded by summer. But in the Spring there were hardly any tourists in La Seyne, although there would probably be some at Bandol, about 10 kms farther south.

Loden had urgently needed a vacation, but his plans were changed in February when the harbor of Toulon went up in a catastrophic explosion. For days afterwards all of southern France seemed to be stunned by the horror of it. The harbor no longer had any military significance but its legendary fame from the time of the *Ancien Regime* had always held a firm place in the Province consciousness.

Toulon was less than 20 kms from La Seyne. The whole area was one big industrial site where there was neither peace and quiet nor any facilities for recreation. The Laurins who had caused the explosion had known nothing about the small significance of the harbor, having merely been misled by its size. But the invisible aliens had not always struck at relatively unimportant targets. Larger industrial centers had also fallen victims to their treacherous attacks, until finally, with the help of the Posbis, it had been possible to destroy them.

So it was that on March 7, 2114, Emmet Loden was not at La Seyne as planned. Instead, he was far outside the galaxy on a moon-sized planet which slightly more than a year before had been dubbed Surprise by Emperor Gonozal VIII.

But now he was more in need of a rest than ever before in his life because he had to work with Dr. John Bigman. Emmet Loden was a square-set man of average height with few outstanding facial features and thick hair. When he spoke he was in the habit of lifting his chin in an odd way which always exposed his Adam's apple. Loden loved convenience and comfort, he usually ate 7 meals a day, and he wore shirts that were at least 3 sizes too large. His marked tendency to laziness had only allowed him to become an average cybernetics technician. Of course now and then he had some ingenious ideas, and this was why he was able to work with Dr. Bigman. Four years previously he had succeeded in simplifying the complicated

Trounhart circuit to such an extent that it could be contained in a matchbox. His name had been mentioned in the Press. It had taken him 7 months of loafing to squander the remuneration he had received. After that, Dr. Bigman had contacted him, and then Emmet Loden made the biggest mistake of his life: he had let Bigman talk him into signing a 5-year work agreement with the Cybernetics Research Institute in Terrania.

From that time on, Loden's flashes of ingenuity subsided because his imagination was totally consumed by his efforts to evade Dr. Bigman's zeal for work. He developed into a shirker, but his attempts to pretend industriousness to Bigman cost him more energy than the actual work. Yet in spite of the dark predictions of Dr. Bigman's other co-workers he was not fired. On the contrary, with great magnanimity Bigman appointed him to the staff of his closest assistants.

Emmet came close to despair when Bigman brought him to a sweat for the first time. The slightly-built cyberneticist, whose name was in such contrast to his stature, urged Loden to rediscover some of his ingenuity. But Loden, sullen and devoid of inventiveness, failed to produce any usable ideas, if one discounted a primitive centrifuge.

Discontentedly puffing and grunting, Emmet thought of all this as he crawled under the alien-looking machine. It was the 4th machine he had investigated today. Bergmann, who also worked in his group, had already completed 7 machine inspections, as well as Albright and Shawlee. In spite of the coordinating tasks he also had to handle, Dr. Bigman had checked over not less than 12 machines with his deft, experienced fingers.

Loden was thankful that they had closed the lifts and installed airlocks at the entrances to the glide ramps. In this way it had been possible to bring oxygen into the subterranean hall. The scientists didn't have to sweat it out any longer in their uncomfortable protective suits and the work went along faster.

Loden gripped a drive-shaft with both hands in order to pull himself a little farther under the machine. He carefully removed a thickness meter from his pocket and attached it to the underside of the machine. The needle quickly indicated a material thickness of 2 cms. From previous inspections, Loden knew there was a hollow space beyond the metal surface. So far Dr. Bigman's hope of finding new research material in one of these hollow spaces had not been realized. Loden pushed the meter a short distance farther along. There was no variation until he reached the end of the hidden hollow space. He detached the small gauge from the cold metal and shoved it back into his pocket. At the same time he felt somebody tugging at his

feet and he heard a muffled voice.

“Come on out, Emmet!”

It didn't do anything to improve his sour mood when he bumped his head against the drive-shaft. He drew back from it and crawled out awkwardly. Holding both hands to his head, he got slowly to his feet.

Ron Shawlee had been watching him curiously. “Did you hurt yourself, Emmet?” he asked sympathetically.

“M-hm!” mumbled Loden, exploring the rapidly rising bump on his head. He finally looked at the other peevishly. “So what do you want, Ron?”

“The little man wants to talk to us,” announced Shawlee.

Loden looked around them hurriedly because he knew what would happen if Dr. Bigman heard anyone refer to him as the “little man.” With faint sighs of resignation the two men turned to respond to the summons. Loden could already see himself loaded with new work assignments.

Bigman was waiting for them in his small office. Albright and Jens Bergmann were already on hand when Loden and Shawlee entered the room. From behind his desk, Dr. John Bigman gave the impression of being a little too small for it. The cybernetics expert was no more than 5 ft 11 inches tall. He had a prominent bald spot which was compensated for by a magnificent Van Dyke beard, the grooming of which occupied most of his spare time. His wrinkled skin looked like cured leather. There was only one possible description for the scientist's appearance: he was ugly.

His seemingly colorless eyes flashed briefly at Loden and Shawlee. “Where have you been, Shawlee?” he asked venomously. “You know I do not allow tardiness.”

Loden grinned to himself as he saw that he was coming through unscathed again. Shawlee answered patiently. “I had to tell Loden first, Doc.”

“Well,” growled Bigman with a patronizing side glance at Loden, “at least one man in this outfit appears to take his work seriously.”

Loden blushed at this undeserved praise while Bergmann and Albright smirked sarcastically.

Bigman swept his hands across the desk, pushing all papers aside that he had been working on so assiduously. He raised his voice. “We've received new orders. All of you know our research head, Dr. Bryant. Rhodan has appointed him to be chief of this project.” It was obvious that he would have considered it more justifiable if the Administrator had appointed him to the position instead. “Our task on Surprise is highly important,” he

continued. "Something has happened that humanity had thought to be almost impossible. Alien intelligences have attacked the Earth. They appeared on Terra without warning and were able to begin their work of destruction before we could take any action against them. Once the Laurins have infiltrated anywhere, it's very difficult to find and attack them. I probably don't have to tell you what might have happened if the Posbis had not taken a hand in it. Our mutants can't be everywhere." Dr. Bigman cleared his throat emphatically. "Mr. Bergmann, are you listening at all?" he asked sharply.

Bergmann hastened to nod affirmatively. Loden suppressed a yawn. At least, he thought, the air-conditioning made it cool here in the office.

Bigman went on. "If the Laurins attack again, we can't count on getting help from the Posbis." When he glanced at Loden the latter instantly raised his eyebrows in an expression of interest. "It is absolutely necessary that we find some device that will enable us to clearly detect the presence of the Laurins. I won't be so presumptive as to speak at this time of the possibility of special goggles, but with sufficient data on hand we could probably develop something along that line. We know definitely that the aliens had a base here on Surprise. A portion of the machinery here was built by them. So it's entirely possible for us to discover clues that would help us to combat the Laurins' most effective weapon which is their invisibility."

"But so far we haven't had any success, Doc," said Bergmann.

The cyberneticist banged his right fist on the desk. "I forbid this criticism!" he said angrily. "From your level you are not in any position to judge the degree of our success!"

"That may be," retorted Bergmann, unperturbed, "but I can't recall that Dr. Bryant announced any breakthroughs in his recent speeches to us."

The scientist's pointed beard began to vibrate. Loden watched his superior attentively, expecting a furious outburst. However, the "little man" controlled himself once more.

"You don't have the capacity for recognizing the importance of small details and fragments of information," he said to Bergmann.

The Swede, who looked more like a farmer than a scientist, refrained from making a reply. He knew it was useless to argue with him.

"Perhaps our investigations to this point have been too superficial," said Dr. Bigman.

Loden groaned inwardly because he could already see himself spending three hours instead of one hour under each machine.

Bigman continued. "In doing so we've not gone into it thoroughly enough." "What do you mean?" asked Albright politely when Bigman made a slight pause.

Loden noticed that Dr. Bigman's left arm was lying at an odd angle on the desk. He knew it was due to his cheap artificial hand which he had refused against all advice to exchange for a better one. The man's incredible stinginess applied even to his own body. It had always been difficult for his team members to put through orders or to obtain spare parts.

Dr. Bigman's voice became shrill. "I mean the mysterious transmitter that the Mechanica creatures once installed on Surprise."

Loden looked imploringly at Shawlee, but apparently it hadn't occurred to his lean-figured co-worker to complain about the additional work. When Bigman started to unfold his plan, Loden interrupted with an unusual show of temper.

"What the devil do you expect to achieve by it, Doc?" he asked. As Bigman looked at him the first spark of benevolence vanished from his eyes. Loden spitefully raised his chin at him. The matter transmitter was the device that Rhodan and his men had landed in after their mis-directed jump from Arkon 3. Aside from the additional workload Loden would have to take on, he could not see what was important enough in the transmitter to justify a painstaking investigation. Also, he didn't believe that the order had come from Bryant but that Bigman was acting on his own initiative.

Dr. Bigman's impatient voice penetrated his thoughts. "Must I always deliver my instructions with explanations?" he demanded to know. "We shall go to the transmitter immediately and we can talk when we get there."

Loden growled out his acceptance petulantly. He knew Bigman would not be dissuaded from the idea. This miserable dwarf-he reddened when he dared to think of his superior in these terms. Anyway, the little man was possessed of a remarkable pig-headedness. Loden wished that something would happen that would shake the scientist so badly that it would change his nature.

But for that, he reflected bitterly, at least the planet would have to explode. Which was exactly what happened about one hour later.

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3000 Laurins had been enough to spread panic and destruction throughout the Earth. With the help of Akon resistance fighters they had been able to

come through the Arkon 3 transmitter to Mars. They had then landed on Earth in a Springer cargo ship without being discovered. It was a typical Laurin tactic to soften up a planet ahead of time and make it vulnerable to attack before their fleets went into action. If an enemy's defenses were totally engaged against their invisible foe on the ground, they would hardly be able to concentrate on a counter attack in outer space. From a human standpoint the Laurins were abject cowards but only from that standpoint.

Unfathomable Nature itself had equipped the physically weak creatures with an organ that protected them. The so-called flex-organ functioned like a mechanical deflector screen. However, its light-deflecting impulses were so complex that it was not possible to cancel them out or to penetrate them optically. Before Terran scientists could make an adequate instrumental examination of the three captured Laurins, they had been killed by members of their own race.

It had been determined that the Laurins' triple eyes were able to see through the reflex screens of other Laurins. So in any case it must be possible to duplicate the faculty of Laurin vision in some mechanical or electronic manner.

While Terra's reconstruction efforts were concentrated on its damaged industrial centers, Rhodan was back again in star cluster M-13. The Administrator did not have time to personally direct the salvage and cleanup work because he feared new Laurin attacks. Following the invasion, Rhodan considered the invisible aliens to be the Solar Imperium's most dangerous enemies. Once they had gained a foothold on a planet they were all but impossible to drive off. Once again, Rhodan and his friends had to alter their plans in the shortest possible time. The strategic measures they had planned to take against the Posbis had to be delayed.

Now that the Laurins knew the position of the Earth there was only one priority task for the Solar Fleet. Further attacks must be warded off while scientists devoted all efforts to the development of a detection device. The leading officials of the Solar Imperium did not dare to think of what could happen if the Posbis should also develop signs of hostility again.

On the 7th of March, 2114, when Perry Rhodan entered his cabin on board the *THEODORICH* it occurred to him that mankind had never before had to fight against such a large number of enemies. There was no other recourse but to include the Akons among them. The Galactic Alliance, endangered since its beginning, was now threatening to break down entirely. Underground movements in the Blue System were constantly gaining influence. At least half of the Supreme Council secretly

sympathized with these forbidden organizations. After Rhodan had shut down the main Akon transmitter on Arkon 3, tumultuous scenes had developed in the Supreme Council. Many Akons had proposed an immediate denouncement of the coalition. But Rhodan had not allowed himself to become disconcerted.

Further precautionary measures were taken. The Administrator had issued instructions to prohibit all spaceships of extraterrestrial powers from landing inside the Solar System. Special teams had been sent out to all affected spaceports to inspect all incoming cargoes of Terran freighters. Under no circumstances were any more Laurins to be allowed to penetrate the system again.

The Akons protested. They claimed that many important matters affecting the Alliance had simply been passed over. When it was learned in the Blue System that the Terrans had succeeded in capturing three Laurins, indignation reached its peak. Now it was obvious to the Akons that the Terrans were playing their own game.

Rhodan found himself forced to deploy considerable portions of the fleet to intercept any possible military takeovers by the Akons.

For several days, preparations had been under way in star cluster M-13 for an extra-galactic expedition. Rhodan wanted to try every means to convince the Posbis' organic plasma brains that it was of vital importance to reveal to Terrans the secret of the Laurin detection device, which the robots undoubtedly possessed.

Meanwhile on Terra, scientists were working feverishly with the findings they had gleaned from the prisoners. However, these were so meagre and incomplete that there was not much hope for any quick results. Three enemies threatened the Solar Imperium. The insidious Laurins could show up again at any moment. The ever inscrutable Posbis, whose conflicting behavior could never be determined beforehand, represented the most massive threat. And the Akons had proved to be unreliable allies who could become enemies when least expected.

Rhodan closed the cabin door. He was grateful for the comparative rest he found here in space after his hectic days on Earth. It was true that preparations for the expedition demanded his total energies, but that project did not pose an immediate threat. He hoped that they would be able to start the daring operation in a few days.

Then something happened that delay the expedition. It all began when the *THEODORICH*'s alarm system was activated.

The sentinel squadron in the battleships and 7 light cruisers. The task force was under the command of Commodore Felipe Imarez. Rhodan had sent the fleet contingent into the system as a protection for the scientists working on Surprise, because he had to reckon with the possibility that the Laurins might attempt to reclaim their lost base.

Commodore Imarez was a reliable commander with a broad background of experience. He was the type of officer who gave his entire energies even to seemingly unimportant assignments. The small lookout formation had deployed itself around the Outside System. The commodore's battleship stood at a distance of approximately 250000 kms from Surprise when 6 fragment ships unexpectedly emerged from hyperspace.

Relative to the other Terran units, Imarez' ship was closest to the superheated, moon-sized planet. As usual the emergence of the fragment ships was not accompanied by transitional warp shocks, but otherwise the Posbis made no effort to camouflage their arrival. With characteristic directness they headed straight for their target which obviously was Surprise.

Three seconds after the scanners had identified the Posbi ships, Imarez went into action. The fragment ships were penetrating the system without showing any concern for the presence of the Terran vessels. Imarez ordered two of his ships to position themselves in the path of the Posbis, to see how far the robots would go with their intentions. While the two warships raced with increasing velocity toward the intercept point, he requested a hypercom contact with Rhodan. Of course the commodore was prepared to handle his responsibilities as required, but in this case some very high-level decisions had to be made. It looked as if the Posbis were going to attack the Terrans the same Terrans that they had rescued from the Laurins only 3 weeks before.

All of which confirmed the suspicion of leading Terran scientists that the whole robot dynasty had been divided. In the interim it had been determined conclusively that the plasma brains did not have an exclusive power of decision over the robots. On the basis of previous experience with the Posbis it had become evident that on the major worlds of the bio-robots there still had to be certain gigantic hyperintrinsic computer brains that exercised a very considerable control over their behavior. Apparently the Posbis were directed by two forces, on the one hand by the cell plasma and on the other by the mammoth positronicons. This could explain the

continuously puzzling contradictions of events. The individual bio-robots were nothing more than actuating vehicles-extensions of two commanding entities who were failing to communicate properly with one another: the plasma and the computers.

Imarez kept a wary eye on the scanner screen. The 6 fragment ships were clearly discernible. The two Terran vessels which would be crossing their path in a few moments revealed themselves as brightly flickering light blips that moved rapidly across the screen. Of course the commodore didn't actually see the ships. He was merely looking at the electronically transmitted impulses of the scanner-tracking instrument, which rendered them optically visible.

Imarez turned to the com officer. "Do you have contact, Lieutenant?" Lt. Walsh made a negative gesture. Due to the fact that the call message had to be relayed through a network of interlinking stations, the commodore knew it would be delayed proportionately. Imarez looked at the screen again. His angular features revealed no emotions. Only his hands seemed to twitch slightly when the fragment ships came close enough to the two Terran units to take hostile action. He had instructed both his commanders to retreat immediately in case of an attack.

The Posbis were not to be blocked. With unmistakable intentions they shot toward their goal with undiminished speed. Imarez picked up the microphone of the intership com which was his contact with the two commanders.

"Give them a warning shot!" he ordered.

But it was too late for this since it was the Posbis who opened fire. And of course they were not content with mere warning shots. Instead, their intent was to destroy the two warships immediately.

"Pull back!" shouted Imarez.

It required an extraordinary effort for the commanders to withdraw their ships from the danger zone while under heavy fire. While watching them, Imarez bit his underlips tensely. On Surprise there were almost 1000 scientists who were inspecting the subterranean base. Hopefully it wouldn't occur to the Posbis to bomb the planet.

"Your contact, sir!" announced Lt. Walsh.

Imarez gave a nod to his first officer who took over the intership com. Then he went over to Walsh who immediately relinquished his seat to him.

Imarez then issued a lightning-fast report that informed the *THEODORICH* of the Posbi attack. It was this news that caused Jefe Claudrin, the

commander of the flagship, to activate the alarms. Within seconds, Rhodan appeared in the control central.

In the meantime, Imarez consolidated his forces around Surprise. Now that there could be no doubt about the Posbis' intentions, he was determined to defend the planet at any price. He knew there wasn't enough time to expect help from other ships. Besides, the Solar Fleet was more widely scattered than ever before. Rhodan had been forced to deploy his units over practically the entire galaxy. The security group assigned to watch over the Blue system had taken his last reserves. To thoroughly cover all danger points, the Solar Imperium would need far more than twice its present number of ships.

Imarez thought sadly of his 27 warships which were far too small a force to withstand a serious attack. If the Posbis used their transformation beams the squadron would probably have little chance of holding out. Even his attempt to use the symbol transmitter failed. He tried to convince the enemy that both sides could come to an understanding if the robots agreed to certain conditions. The indication of the symbol messages that the Terrans were the "true life" form was completely ignored by the Posbis.

The fragment ships drew nearer to Surprise. They only interrupted their approach when the Imperium's squadron closed with them in battle. Both sides opened fire, but within only a few minutes Imarez knew that he was not able to hold Surprise for long.

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Emmet Loden had a definite suspicion that the air inside the transmitter smelled stuffy. It was a strange odor like mold or rotten wood, yet at the same time it was alien and peculiar, as if it were flowing through an invisible opening from an incomprehensible source. He rejected the idea because he knew there must be another explanation for the bad air. Besides, the others with him didn't seem to notice it.

With an imperious gesture, Dr. Bigman indicated to Albright that he should close the entrance. Loden shivered although it was warm inside the transmitter.

Bigman looked with dissatisfaction at his companions. "Gentlemen, we will not permit ourselves to be disturbed in here. Work distractions have always proved undesirable."

Loden reflected angrily that Bigman was treating them like a bunch of children.

The small man seemed to patter across the chamber on his little legs. "Probably the Laurins also discovered this transmitter, but I doubt that they made use of it." When he chuckled it was somehow a repulsive, tinny sound. Bigman always doubted that other beings were capable of deeds he couldn't perform himself.

Bergmann interjected a comment. "I wonder if they even wanted to use it. Presumably it was only controllable by the Mechanica people. The Laurins would probably have landed somewhere between the dimensions."

"Pah-h!" Bigman's Van Dyke trembled. His eyes flashed. "Your thinking is as sluggish as you look!" he exclaimed insultingly.

Loden thought that of all people the little man should realize that a person's mental qualities were not to be measured by outward appearances.

Shawlee spoke up heatedly. "It's still conceivable that the Laurins didn't understand anything about the transmitter's function," he said. "They've always avoided trying out equipment when they didn't know the purpose of it."

Loden finally found a place in the wall that offered a comfortable back support. He leaned against it with a sigh of relief while Dr. Bigman raised a pontifical finger and continued speaking.

"Certainly we have no proof that the Laurins had transmitters, so it might be assumed that when they chanced upon such an apparatus they wouldn't know what to do with it." Bigman shook his head as if to express his regret that his listeners were incapable of following him into the unsuspected strata of his own mental flights. "The Laurins are technically developed. In every respect their space technology can be compared with ours. When a race that far advanced discovers an alien transmitter, sooner or later it's going to experiment with it."

The men were so heavily engrossed in their discussion that they failed to hear the buzzing of the radio transceiver they had brought along. They only broke off their conversation when Loden moved away from the wall, his face was white as chalk. For a moment it had seemed to him that the wall was being shaken by a vibration. Nor did it appear to be a harmless phenomenon because the shaking had come from the depths of the ground.

"What's wrong with you, Emmet!?" queried Bigman in sudden alarm.

Loden backed up slightly, just enough so that his fingertips could touch the wall. It was as if he were touching something alive. The whole transmitter chamber was in unexplainable motion. Suddenly Dr. Bigman appeared to him as in a distorted picture. The rattling movements were causing him to

blur in Loden's eyes.

Even the scientist's voice seemed cracked when he shouted in a panic: "We have to get out of here!"

His words tore Loden out of his fixation. When the floor also began to tremble, he ran toward the exit. Bergmann was directly in front of him, a large figure with sure movements in the midst of the uproar. When they reached the hatch, Bergmann tried to open it. Then he turned suddenly and stared at Loden.

"It's locked," he said in a troubled tone.

Loden looked beyond him, wanting to try the lock himself, but the Swede stood in his way as if petrified. Loden began to lose hope when he felt that something terrible was happening—that they were being exposed to a force that left them helpless before it.

Bigman was manipulating the transceiver. "It's Dr. Bryant!" he called out. "He just said that the planet is breaking apart!"

*

Of Commodore Imarez' task force, 9 of the ships had already been forced to retreat. The strongest defense screens could not stand up for long against the Posbis' heavy armaments. The shear force of the robots' attack indicated that they were determined to conquer Surprise unconditionally.

Commodore Imarez loosened the top button of his uniform jacket just as the ship trembled under the impact of another hit. He glanced at Lt. Walsh. "Send out a dispatch, Lieutenant," he ordered. "Advise the Administrator that we can't hold Surprise."

Walsh was a young officer. Imarez' experienced eye saw that the com operator was only controlling himself with an effort. His face was whiter than the space video raster.

Three robot ships had already broken through the Terran blockade and were flying toward Surprise. Imarez watched the action on the tracking screen. He decided to make one last attempt to divert the robots from their objective.

"Attention!" he called over the intership com. "To all commanders of ships still in action! We may be able to destroy at least one enemy ship with our combined forces. Let's take one that's already broken through. If we can destroy it, the Posbis might turn back."

Bronston, the first officer, had taken over the flight console, but now he

stared at Imarez disconcertedly as the ship shook under another blow. The powerful generators howled as the absorption screens drew almost all the ship's power for several seconds. The lights seemed ready to go out, but then the battleship suddenly shot away.

Imarez' ship was at the head of the Terran formation. Ahead of them three fragment ships were on a direct course toward the moon-sized planet. The three other Posbi ships appeared to be drawing away from Surprise, but Imarez knew they couldn't build their hopes on that. The robots would show up in another place.

The Terran group was closing in. Imarez told his commanders which Posbi ship he had chosen to be the target of their concentrated fire. At the same time, Lt. Walsh sent off another flash report to Rhodan. The Administrator was advised that by all indications Surprise was lost.

Imarez was already thinking of how he might bring the 1000 scientists to safety as fast as possible. He decided to land two warships. Meanwhile he had contacted Dr. Bryant, the leader of the technical group below, and had informed him of what was happening. By now the scientist would be starting to call his research teams together.

Imarez' brain was working like a well-oiled machine. Even as he was working out the rescue plan in his mind he was giving new instructions to the fire control centrals.

The remaining 18 ships of the task force opened fire on one of the fragment ships which by now was close above the planet's surface-too close, in Imarez' opinion. He gave Bronston a warning signal but his first officer had already grasped the situation. Astonishingly, the other fragment ships no longer concerned themselves with the attack against their sister ship. Instead they continued to hurtle toward Surprise.

Once they had landed, thought Imarez, it would be too late. His inner tension was not due so much to fear as it was to his flat conviction that he was not able to hold off the robots.

Then he heard Bronston's deep voice: "We've got him, sir!"

Even the Posbi vessel's relativity screen could not withstand the concentrated mass fire from 18 Terran battleships. Heavily battered, the great cubical mass started a downward spiral as it lost control. The commodore's cry of triumph was quickly checked by a new sense of alarm as he realized what was going to happen to the damaged enemy ship. If something unforeseen didn't occur, the robot ship would crash into Surprise. It was a massive vessel and had built up a tremendous

acceleration. There was no atmosphere to brake its fall.

Imarez watched the viewscreen in desperation. In his wildest phantasies he could not imagine what havoc might be wrought by the crash of the mighty ship. He only knew that 1000 Terrans were in deadly danger.

Bronston's veteran experience had enabled him to draw certain conclusions from the involuntary trajectory of the Posbi ship. "If it crashes into the base," he said gloomily, "we can call it off and go home. Nobody down there would be left alive."

Imarez watched as the disc of the planet seemed to move languidly into the path of the falling battleship. He knew it was an illusion since it was the space vessel that was in relatively swifter motion. He didn't dare to think of what might happen to the scientists. He only realized that his own attack order had virtually caused the present situation. The two officers followed the course of the plunging robot ship as if in a trance.

Walsh spoke up uncertainly: "Dr. Bryant is calling us. He's asking for more information."

Imarez felt a queasiness in his stomach. He pulled himself together with an effort. "Tell him we'll soon be making a landing to rescue them," he ordered.

He ignored the silent question in the lieutenant's eyes. Walsh swallowed hard and turned back to his console. Imarez thought how hard it was to lie to a man, especially when he had only a few moments to live.

However, he saw that the other two cube ships, in the moment of preparing to land, had changed their courses. Evidently the robot commanders had realized what was going to happen to the damaged ship. The two enemy vessels turned back into outer space.

The crash of the gigantic ship unleashed energies which were the equivalent of 30000 megatons of TNT. The unbroken speed of its descent and the terrific mass of the ship sent it plunging 5 kms deep into the brittle crust of Surprise. The entire planet was shaken by internal earthquakes.

Bronston pushed back in his pilot's seat as if he could not grasp what was happening.

"Dr. Bryant's calling again," announced Walsh. "He wants to know what happened. He says the planet's going to blow apart."

Imarez came back to himself. The scientist had survived the impact, so the crash must not have been close to him. He instructed Walsh: "We're landing next to the base to take them all on board immediately."

When he glanced at the viewscreen again he saw the flickering of fire creeping across parts of the planet's crust. Masses of core magma were streaming through fissures in the crumbling surface. By nature this world was already an inferno, but now it was in a state of utter chaos. It was obvious to Imarez that the landing itself would be a gamble.

"The base is starting to cave in," announced Walsh shakenly. "We'd better hurry!"

By now Surprise filled the panoramic viewscreen entirely. The devastation resulting from the crash of the fragment ship was unimaginable. On the outer rim of the tiny world a huge chasm yawned, large enough to swallow a major city. A second massive fissure was beginning to extend across another part of the screen. It appeared that the whole planet was getting ready to explode. Darting tongues of flame were branching out in fiery lines across the unprotected surface. Also in other areas more of the molten magma broke through and turned it into a boiling inferno.

The unleashed energies did nothing to help the communications with the waiting scientists who hoped to be rescued. While still trying to talk to Dr. Bryant, Lt. Walsh seemed to be it the end of his nervous stamina. Simultaneously the two rescue ships became visible on the screen-two giant spheres of Arkon steel, lowering into chaos.

The commodore looked at the chronometer. The Posbi ships had disappeared. Surprise had become worthless to them, as it would be to the Laurins and the Terrans. In a short time, Outside was going to lose another planet. The subterranean stronghold of the Mechanica beings would perish with it.

*

Major Tschu-Kameh pulled the last of the scientists into the airlock. The man struggled and shouted something at him but he paid no attention to him. Every added second spent in this hell could mean death for all of them. They had waited too long as it was. The other warship had already taken off with 600 rescued men on board. Half of the base had caved in, and molten lava was now streaming into the rooms and passages.

Inside the airlock, Tschu-Kameh had his men close the outer hatch while he issued an order for immediate takeoff. The man who had come in last opened his helmet. He seemed to be a good-natured type but just now he looked very concerned.

"I'm Dr. Bryant," he said. "I was in charge of the research work on

Surprise.” Tschu-Kameh was relieved to feel the ship lift off the ground. “I’m sorry all this happened, Doctor,” he answered, “but we should be glad that a rescue was possible at all.”

The scientist shook his head. “Not all of the men are on board,” he said wearily. “A small team of 5 men is still on Surprise.”

The Asiatic stared incredulously at him. “How is that possible? We gave them enough time to get out!”

“They’re stuck inside the transmitter. Somehow it must have closed by itself. The men did not come out of it.”

Major Tschu-Kameh lowered his head. “We can’t go back, Doc,” he said dejectedly. “I can’t risk the lives of all these men.”

Dr. Bryant nodded in silence. The ship continued to accelerate, which was small consolation to him. It was possible that Dr. Bigman and his companions were still alive, waiting down there for somebody to rescue them. They were locked in the transmitter without knowing what was transpiring outside. They faced a terrible death. All they could hope for now was that it would come swiftly.

“You have to try to get over it,” said Major Tschu-Kameh. “Those men haven’t died in vain.”

If Dr. Bryant had really suspected that Dr. Bigman’s team would survive the explosion, probably he might have taken a different course of action. As it was, however, he only turned silently away and accompanied the major to the control central. Behind them they saw the planet die.

2.

SCHOPPROIT'S COMPLAINT

For Emmet Loden death had always been something that happened to other people. Previously he had assumed that he possessed some kind of immunity to it. Therefore Dr. Bigman's words hit him the hardest of all those present.

Bergmann was the first to gather his wits. "We have to tell Dr. Bryant immediately that we can't break out of here without help. He has to send a crew to burn us out of this trap!"

Shawlee seemed to be close to hysteria. "The base has caved in! The base has caved in!" He kept shouting this until Albright gave him a shove.

Loden was the only inactive one. Every movement or effort now seemed to him to be entirely useless and superfluous.

After a while Dr. Bigman looked up from the radio receiver. "Shawlee, you're right! Dr. Bryant just told me that some of the rooms have caved in. A Posbi spaceship has crashed and caused the explosion. Bryant had promised to help us to soon as there's a chance to get back into the base. Two ships of the fleet are landing to pick us up."

Loden saw only a small consolation in the cyberneticist's statement. If it was true that the base had caved in, then it would take far too long for a rescue party to get to them. In the meantime the planet would break apart.

Bergmann and Albright started to make a thorough inspection of the transmitter's hatch door. Albright was a man of stocky build who wore his long hair carefully combed at the back of his neck. He always looked like a model from a men's magazine, but just now he had lost something of his groomed appearance.

Shawlee stared at each one of them as if he might tell from their attitudes if there was still any hope. Now and then Loden touched the wall with his fingertips. The trembling had changed from a mere vibration to longer and slower impulses. But this seemed to be far more ominous. Loden took a few steps toward Dr. Bigman.

The scientist turned to him grimly. "It's over for us," he said. "Dr. Bryant doesn't answer. The last I heard him say was that he had to abandon his position. The ships have landed."

Shawlee protested. "But they can't just leave us to die down here!"

Albright lunged toward him from the hatch door. "Will you shut up!?" he yelled.

Shawlee ran to Dr. Bigman and pointed frantically to the transceiver. "Doc, you have to try to contact the ship!"

The scientist handed him the apparatus. "Try it yourself," he said.

Loden glanced at the entrance. Bergmann had given up laboring over the locked door. No sound penetrated the thick walls of the transmitter, but suddenly the hollow chamber moved with a mighty jerk. Loden was thrown from his position. He heard Albright yell and saw Shawlee collide with Dr. Bryant. After that they were in darkness. Once again the transmitter was shaken, but by then Loden had braced himself.

Bergmann spoke from somewhere in the darkness. "What an impressive funeral!" he commented.

Loden pressed his head against the inner wall of the transmitter. The metal was heating up fast.

*

Perry Rhodan walked around the pilot's seat and leaned with both hands against the edge of the chart table. Claudrin had also gotten up. His broad figure took up almost one end of the table. Atlan was bent over a spread out star chart.

"This point used to be Surprise," he said. "We can remove it from the chart now. It was a world that never brought us much luck, Barbarian."

Rhodan shook his head thoughtfully. "At least Commodore Imarez' squadron was able to save all but 5 men before it broke into three pieces."

Claudrin cleared his throat cautiously but could not avoid a thunderous sound that made the other two men look up at him. He smiled apologetically. "Unfortunately we lost another chance of finding something that could nullify the Laurins' invisibility," he said.

"I don't believe that chance was ever too great," commented Rhodan. "On the contrary, our efforts on Surprise haven't brought us anywhere. It would be foolhardy at this moment for us to harbor any hopes in that regard, gentlemen. We don't have anything to compensate for the Laurins' invisibility. And it seems that we won't have anything like that in the foreseeable future."

Atlan regarded his old friend across the table. "What do you intend to do to

improve this dangerous situation?" he asked.

"In any case the preparation work for the coming expedition will be pushed forward. In spite of the Posbi attack on Surprise, I believe we can still get together." Rhodan waved a hand over the star charts. "In fact we have to unite with them if we don't want to lose all of this."

Atlan did not miss the gravity of his tone. Now, he thought, these barbarians were faced with a problem that wasn't so easy to master. The Arkonide suppressed an ironic smile. It was not only a problem for the Terrans but it was also his own.

*

At first Loden thought that the lighting system was still intact, but when he got up he saw that it was a reddish glow that came from an unseen source and spread dim illumination through the chamber. Now he could clearly recognize the other men again. Bergmann was still standing at the entrance. Shawlee was curled up in a corner While Dr. Bigman stood upright in the middle of the transmitter as if to take up an unspoken challenge. Albright was leaning against the wall, looking questioningly at Loden. The light became a bit brighter, but otherwise nothing happened.

"What does it mean?" Loden demanded to know. "Doc, do you think a rescue team is out there somewhere?"

"Nonsense!" declared Bigman with a rediscovered arrogance. "The light is being generated here on the inside. Evidently the earthquakes have activated a contact."

Loden's budding hopes dwindled for the moment. He took a step back and then something happened to his body. Immediately he noted that he couldn't control the phenomenon. It lasted only a few seconds, and then the 5 men in the transmitter ceased to exist.

In the construction of their base the former inhabitants of Mechanica had thought of everything including catastrophes. They had left nothing to chance. But neither Dr. Bigman nor his companions knew anything about that. In their temporary state they were incapable of forming any thoughts. Shortly before the final destruction, the mysterious transmitter had ejected them.

The potentials for the 5 Terrans now were limited. They could become lost between the dimensions for all eternity. Or they could also come out in another transmitter. The number of Mechanica transmitters still in existence were few, and the planets where they had been erected had one

unpleasant characteristic in common.

They were dangerous!

*

Schopproit's broad, short tail began to vibrate with indignation. His seal-like face with its moist round eyes revealed a grimace of anger. Now there was irrefutable evidence that Tosnik had stolen the lower leaves of his plant!

He had eaten his way up the stalk as far as he could raise his fat body. It wasn't out of a sense of decency that he had left the upper leaves for Schopproit, but merely because of his inability to reach that far.

Now with its bare stalk, Schopproit's plant looked absolutely awful. It was simply impossible to submit it to the Awards Council in this condition. While Tosnik watched over his own plant as if it were a sacred shrine, and fed it 8 times a day and sheltered it with other foliage, in his greed he went and attacked other plants.

Schopproit's badger-sized, blue-pelted body trembled with rage. Of course he couldn't prove that Tosnik was behind this thievery, but the clues all led to his burrow. Schopproit hadn't remained awake all night for nothing. The scent had been Tosnik's, and the damp odor of the brook had lingered in the air even longer. Tosnik's cave was close by the brook, right at the bottom of the slope, while Schopproit had to sleep farther up with the younger ones.

Dolefully, he regarded his plant as the remaining leaves moved feebly in the morning wind. He heard somebody gliding up behind him and turned to see Sorenzeych emerge out of the semi-darkness. The youngster nodded toward the mined plant questioningly.

"Tosnik!" hissed Schopproit.

Still half asleep, Sorenzeych hobbled over to the plant. He was one of the pack leaders of the younger ones, which did not yet entitle him to a plant of his own. "What now?" he asked in frank sympathy.

Schopproit turned slowly until he was facing directly toward the forbidden city. He saw Sorenzeych shudder as the rising wind ruffled the youngster's bluish fur.

"That's where I'm going!" he answered with irrevocable decision.

For his youth, Sorenzeych's bearing was considerably mature. His voice was just discernible above the babbling of the brook. "Maybe that's your

only chance of still winning any recognition from the Awards Council.”

“Yes,” agreed Schopproit.

As he saw the silhouette of his worthless plant standing out against the dawn sky, he was seized by a deep desperation. Only now did he realize how much he had been counting on an award, which was his only chance of getting downslope from the habitations of the younger ones-closer to the brook. Not that he had anything against the youngsters, but at his age it was a painful embarrassment to have to live so far up the slope.

Sorenzeych spoke again: “You could lose your life by going there.”

“Yes, I know.”

Schopproit didn’t wait for Sorenzeych to offer another objection because he knew it wouldn’t be hard for the pack leader to sway his resolve. As fast as his short legs could carry him, he ran diagonally down the slope. It would barely be daylight when he reached the forbidden city.

The others were still asleep. He resisted a temptation to pass by Tosnik’s bower and shout a few insults at him. Instead he went directly to the stream. Although it was cool in the early morning, for Schopproit it was a distinct pleasure to plunge into the water. The brook was the border between them and the city. Whoever ventured to the opposite bank had to risk being snatched up and killed by the Watchers there. Sometimes they also threw live victims back into the stream.

The Old Ones told of a time when the forbidden city had not yet existed beyond the opposite shore. It must have been placed there unaccountable generations ago. Schopproit’s intelligence was insufficient to entertain any but the most superficial concepts concerning the origin of the city and its Watchers. For him these things were all a part of Nature. He accepted them as he did the wind, the night, the brook, and the Law of the Slope.

Each of his kind who managed to hollow out a little more of the passage under the city could count on being allowed to move a little farther down the slope, into a damper and more comfortable cave. The tunnel under the city was definitely as old as the city itself. They had been digging in it for an unthinkable length of time, always hoping that by this means they could get to the inner part of the city without being discovered by the Watchers.

Schopproit allowed himself to drift with the current. Now and again he kicked out with his legs to bring him a little closer to the other bank. Finally he discovered a level spot on the shoreline and he swam to it with powerful strokes. When he felt ground under his short legs he waded ashore. From here the slope on the other side was still in shadow. He lifted

his snout to explore the air. Now he was completely on his own. Nobody would look for him if he did not get back to the slope at a certain time. Thus decided, he worked his way through the reed grass, which made a rustling sound as he moved along. The odor of the souk bushes in full bloom penetrated his nostrils. The increasing dawn light helped him now to find his way more easily. His pelt dried swiftly in the morning wind and was combed flat by the grass as he pushed through it. A blychost hopped in front of him through the bushes and disappeared in the direction of the brook. Probably he had disturbed its slumbers because normally a blychost tended to sleep until full daylight.

Schopproit held his burrowing claws closer to his body in order to make better headway. He noted quickly that he was getting closer to the city when the bushes began to thin out. The Watchers always burned the plants down at the edge of the city. It was surrounded by a ring of scorched earth where only the hardy roots of the souk bushes could be seen.

Like every slope dweller, Schopproit was well informed about the location of the entrance to the subterranean passage. His forefathers had also come here to push the tunnel further along. He didn't know how far the work had progressed but he didn't believe the passage had yet reached under the central part of the city.

In spite of the layer of mist that lay over the land, Schopproit recognized the crooked souk bush right away and hurried to it. The opening to the underground excavation was disguised better than he had expected. Cautiously he pulled the foliage to one side. But before he glided into the hole behind it he took another look at the forbidden city.

It lay silently before him in the dim morning light. To Schopproit it appeared to be vast and incomprehensible. It was surrounded by a wall beyond which the buildings loomed mightily. The sight was so alien that he began to have second thoughts about his venture. But then he thought of Tosnik's depredations. Schopproit had reached an age that did not permit him to live any longer with the younger ones. He had to perform a deed that would gain him permission to move farther down the slope. He was now the oldest among his kind who lived among the younger ones. He was ashamed of this although the young pack was very friendly to him.

He pulled himself together abruptly. Now that his chance of getting a better cave by means of his beautiful plant had been spoiled, he had to consider this final possibility.

He crawled into the passage and concealed the opening with a makeshift camouflage of fallen branches and leaves. At a shallow depth the tunnel led

directly toward the city. Here and there were partial cave-ins that he had to dig his way through.

After a while he felt that he was gradually getting closer to the surface. By his reckoning he had already covered half of the distance, but a burning question had risen in his mind. Just how far had his predecessors excavated this tunnel? Did it lead closer to the inner city than the slope dwellers presumed it did?

Schopproit crept onward, expecting to reach the end at any moment. Twice he passed small air shafts. Then, when he was thinking that the passage was endless, he bumped into a resistance. Solid earth prevented him from going farther. He was sure this was not merely another cave-in.

He had reached his goal. Now he could get to work and dig the tunnel deeper. His burrowing claws went into action. The main work would consist of removing the loose earth later. His forefathers had used a large sespa leaf for this purpose. They had loaded it with soil and dragged it out of the tunnel. Schopproit hoped that when he had finished his digging he'd be able to find a suitable special leaf close to the entrance.

He had no clear idea of how long he would keep working here, but he wanted to make an impressive contribution. His shoveling claws broke through so suddenly that he thought he had merely cleared away a cave-in after all. But then a shaft of bright light fell into the tunnel.

Schopproit stuck his head out. What he saw caused him to stiffen in fright. The tunnel was finished! He found himself in the center of the city.

His fur bristled instinctively. He trembled in an overwhelming transport of fear. His eyes widened, unable to comprehend the incomprehensible. He had done something that his race had only dreamed of accomplishing since time immemorial. Schopproit had completed the work on the tunnel. They now had an underground access to the forbidden city.

Trembling in his entire body, Schopproit sank back into the shaft.

3.

THE FORBIDDEN CITY

For Loden it was incomprehensible how a human body could go from nothing to a new existence in such a short time. Or perhaps the process had taken much longer than he assumed. During his immaterial state practically any span of time might have passed, but since in that condition he had ceased to think, it would always appear to him as having been but a moment.

When he opened his eyes he saw immediately that they were inside another transmitter. Its construction was the same as the other, but the entrances or exits were placed differently. When he tried to get up he found that he was completely exhausted.

Dr. Bigman had just gotten up and was looking at the entrances. Probably he had come to the same conclusion as Loden. Shawlee sat on the floor, his face reflecting a flicker of new confidence, while Bergmann was in the process of helping Albright to his feet.

Loden was grateful for the fact that there were no further earthquakes. And that was another proof that they were no longer in the same transmitter where their new fate had begun. It occurred to him that there was only one transmitter located on Surprise which meant that they weren't on Surprise at all now.

He wiped the sweat from his forehead. If they were not on Surprise, then where were they? When he considered the various possibilities he groaned. What would happen to them if this transmitter had been erected on a world with a methane atmosphere? They were not wearing spacesuits and thus they were dependent upon oxygen and endurable temperatures. They could not see anything of their environment. For Loden this new situation was weird. Here they sat in this small room, transported through nothingness, not knowing what awaited them. He almost feared that one of the men would be able to open the door.

Dr. Bigman was the first to speak. "It seems we've survived a transmitter jump," he said with an effort. "It wasn't by choice but it probably saved our lives because it's unlikely we're still on Surprise."

Shawlee smiled hopefully but the little man's apparent optimism seemed a bit premature to Loden.

"We still don't know what world we've landed on," he cautioned. Bigman seemed to have found a portion of his inexhaustible energy again. "In any case," he declared, "we don't have to fear any longer that a planet is going to explode from under us. We're alive and we can now proceed in peace to find out what part of the galaxy we've come to."

He began by making a systematic inspection of the hatch lock. The few gadgets and tools they had with them wouldn't be much help to them here. Nevertheless Bigman persevered at his task. Bergmann and Albright joined him while Shawlee and Loden searched the inside of the transmitter for any clues as to the nature of the world outside.

Almost an hour had passed when Bigman suddenly stepped back from the door. "What did you find, Doc?" asked Bergmann excitedly. The others also interrupted their labors.

"We can stop our work now," he said tensely.

"What's happened?" inquired Albright.

"Can't you hear it?" asked Bigman. He pointed with his synthetic hand at the door. "Somebody out there is getting ready to open the hatch."

Loden and Shawlee exchanged perplexed glances. Outside these metal walls there could be countless things that represented a deadly danger for them. Involuntarily, Loden shrank back from the hatch door.

"Let's hope there's oxygen out there," commented Albright.

Maybe they'd all suffocate before they even had a chance to see who was trying to set them free. Before Loden could think any more about it, the door slid to one side and opened their view to the alien world.

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Instinctively, Emmet Loden held his breath. Outside it was twilight and he thought he saw the shadowy outlines of nearby buildings. Cautiously he let the air out of his lungs then and drew in a deep breath. He felt no physical reaction as he took in the alien oxygen mixture. If the atmosphere did not contain any poisonous elements, they would survive. His eyes began to adjust themselves to the dim light.

"Maybe it opened automatically," observed Bergmann pensively. "What do you think, Doc? Could we have activated the mechanism by accident?"

Dr. Bigman shook his bald head decisively. "The hatch was opened from the outside," he insisted.

Bergmann cautiously approached the opening. "Where might our liberators

be?" Bigman stepped past the Swede into the open. Then Loden saw a metallic claw reach out from the side and grasp him. In a darting motion the scientist disappeared from the doorway. His cry of warning seemed to echo inside the transmitter.

"Our reception committee," said Albright dryly.

The metal claw reappeared in the opening. Loden's heart seemed to leap to his throat when the rest of the body followed. In the entire galaxy there was only one kind of robots who had such a bizarre appearance: the Posbis!

Bergmann had drawn back from the hatchway but the robot followed him resolutely into the transmitter chamber. Loden's thoughts raced in confusion as he shrank back against the wall.

Albright's reaction was more aggressive. With a composure that bordered on the miraculous he raised up one of the few tools they had brought with them, an all-purpose wrench – and threatened the robot with it. For a moment the robot appeared to be non-plussed by this action, but then his claw shot forward. Albright dodged it swiftly but could not avoid being hooked by his jacket collar and jerked into the air. He cursed his assailant furiously and then there was a hollow clanking sound as he struck the Posbi with the wrench. But his bitter struggle was in vain as the robot dragged him away.

Then they heard Bigman's voice from somewhere between the buildings. "Don't panic, men!" he shouted. "These fellows may look like Posbis but they're just ordinary robots! They haven't any plasma!"

For the present it was entirely useless to think of putting up a resistance. Evidently the robots were under the control of a central brain who had given them fixed commands which were not to be altered. They had to wait and see what was going to happen now.

"Let's just go along with them," Loden said to Bergmann and Shawlee. If Dr. Bigman is still yelling out instructions we know he isn't dead. It's my guess that the head brain is as interested in knowing something about us as we are in finding out where we've landed."

Bergmann and Albright were well-balanced types whose personalities had not always submitted without a struggle to Dr. Bigman's powerful will, but now they seemed to agree. While Loden was trying to figure out what to do in the next few minutes or hours, the robot came back to get Shawlee. The latter permitted himself to be led away without resistance.

"Let me bring up the rear," said Loden to the Swede. "It will give me time to figure something out."

Bergmann grinned at him. "I wish the little man could see you now," he said sarcastically as he positioned himself next to the entrance.

"Don't you worry about that!" retorted Loden sharply.

They waited silently until the robot came back. Without apparent effort the thing picked up Bergmann and carried him off. The two were barely out of sight before Loden started working out his strategy. He had heard Bergmann say there was probably another robot outside the entrance. Without further hesitation, Loden stepped outside. A cool wind blew against him. Was he mistaken or had it gotten lighter since Bigman had disappeared? The robot by the door reacted exactly as Loden had figured it would. After a moment of hesitation it grasped him and held him firmly. Loden knew the thing was merely programmed to stand outside and watch, but he had just made it act against orders. Undoubtedly it was in communication with the central brain, and Loden had forced the latter to alter its commands without being near it. Perhaps this was done without much effort but it might have gained time for Dr. Bigman. Loden reasoned that they had to try to keep the robot brain constantly busy so that it would never be quite certain about the Terrans. If it once arrived at a fixed decision concerning the prisoners, that decision could-mean death to all five of them.

Loden had to sneeze as the cool wind swept over him. Although the robot's massive form blocked most of his view he began to take in his surroundings. The transmitter was part of a base which was somewhat smaller than the one on Surprise. Also, it had been built on the surface. He saw an entire row of buildings which were typical of the Mechanica style of architecture. They were arranged in a circle and Loden estimated that he was about 50 meters from its center. The transmitter itself stood next to a long, shed-like structure.

Suddenly the robot began to move, pulling Loden with him. "Just take it easy, friend," Loden admonished the mechanical creature. "Haste makes waste, you know."

The robot seemed to be of another opinion because it continued its rapid pace. Loden walked beside it with difficulty because his steps were hindered by the tight clutch of the claw. They proceeded across the open area that separated them from the nearest building. Loden took advantage of the opportunity to get his bearings, noting first of all the location of the transmitter. Of course it was more than unlikely that they would be using it again, but a little foresight wouldn't hurt, just in case.

"Where are you taking me?" inquired Loden, although he knew he

wouldn't get an answer. Sooner or later he'd be able to see his captor's objective for himself.

It was hard for him to estimate the age of the stronghold but it had probably existed longer than the one on Surprise. The robots of the long-extinct race of Mechanica still continued here. The best robotics experts of the galaxy had made them, so the metallic creatures had outlived their creators.

Loden's professional interest was aroused. When would they be able to construct such advanced machines as this on Earth? He frankly confessed to himself that he used to believe the science of cybernetics couldn't develop much farther. However, he didn't have much time to regret this opinion because the robot brought him into the building. He looked back at the outside with mixed feelings because it was possible that he would never see freedom again.

As the door banged shut behind him he found himself in a kind of foyer whose walls were painted with some brilliant color he couldn't define. A single machine was located near one side of the entrance. When the robot dragged Loden over to it a few control lamps flashed on. He guessed that he was being subjected to a preliminary inspection. Whatever the results were he didn't get to find out because he was shoved on his way again.

Before him a sliding door opened to reveal a large room that was crowded with technical installations. At first he thought he was looking at a number of individual machines, but then he realized that everything here was one interrelated complex. A narrow aisle led past the metal housings of the super machine. The robot indicated that Loden was to go in that direction. It didn't leave him much time for a closer inspection but he had no doubt that he was in the presence of the stronghold's central brain.

The aisle or passage led into a fair-sized room that was filled with automatic inspection and control installations. When Loden entered he found Dr. Bigman in the process of giving a lecture to the other men.

"Ah, Emmet!" cried the little man with satisfaction. "At last you're with us." Loden would like to have explained that the positronic brain had probably been waiting to begin its investigations until they were all together. They had arrived together in the transmitter, so it would be robot logic to continue handling them as one entity.

Bigman drew himself up slightly. "I have no doubt that we can communicate with the brain by means of signs and symbols," he said. "For me this is the most complex installation of this kind that we have ever found in the galaxy. It wouldn't be any great difficulty for the brain to

communicate with us.”

Loden glanced at Albright who was still clutching his universal wrench. The engineer was a practical-minded man but here it wasn't going to help him very much.

“The positronicon hasn't yet decided what to make of us,” continued Bigman. “It seems that it would be having serious thoughts about our origin. It may be hard to convince it that we're harmless.”

“You're right, Doc,” said Loden. He looked suspiciously behind him. The two robots that had brought them here were standing motionlessly at the exit to the outer passage. Every way of escape was blocked. He looked at Dr. Bigman and formed a circle with his hands. As the latter glanced warily at the inspection devices, Loden suggested: “Try to explain to it that our intentions are harmless.”

“Naturally,” retorted Dr. Bigman angrily, “I would never have thought of it without your sage advice!” He looked at the positronicon. “I just hope we can succeed before the brain decides that we're useless baggage here and that therefore we must be eliminated.” He took a position to begin his attempt at using symbols to communicate. With a finger of his synthetic hand he drew a circle in the air.

Loden was already trying to figure how to present some new problems to the brain after it had reached a decision. He didn't doubt Dr. Bigman's abilities but he had to look at the situation realistically. The little man could try anything he pleased but the result would be the same: the positronicon would determine that 5 lost Terrans at this base were superfluous.

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Schopproit didn't know how long he had lain there without daring to move. It was not yet full daylight so that little illumination fell into the shaft. He asked himself why the Watchers had not come to kill him. He harbored the faint hope that perhaps they hadn't yet discovered him. The hole he had unexpectedly excavated was not large. He could just barely stick his head through it. Although nothing usually escaped the Watchers' eyes, they could have overlooked this small opening.

Schopproit fought against an impulse to simply flee through the tunnel, but finally a strange sense of defiance made him hold on. Ever so slowly, he shoved his head through the opening again to take a second look at the forbidden city.

The buildings lay deserted in the dim morning light. Behind them on the

horizon the dawn was breaking, tinging an occasional cloud with a red golden hue. He raised his snout to sniff the air. Of course the Watchers had no scent but he did it out of instinct.

But then-he saw two of them!

Squeaking in fear, he ducked back into the hole. Then at the same time his brain told him that the Watchers could not have seen him because they were standing in front of a dome-shaped building that they were apparently about to enter.

Although his nerves threatened to revolt, Schopproit forced himself to the surface once more. The best proof that the Watchers had not discovered him was that they paid no attention to him. His fur raised in hackles when he saw that the two Watchers had opened the door of the small dome. For Schopproit it was incomprehensible that there were creatures who built their caves on the surface, and far from the brook as well.

One of the Watchers went out of his view as he drew himself sideways behind the dome. The second one took up a position by the door as if he expected that somebody would come out.

And somebody did come out!

Schopproit almost emitted a cry of astonishment. The creature who now appeared in the doorway could not possibly be a Watcher, although it was almost as big as some of them. Then to Schopproit's horror the Watcher took hold of his helpless victim and jerked him outside. Schopproit trembled in sympathy and indignation.

With obvious haste the Watcher moved away with his prisoner. The direction he took would bring him close by the tunnel. Schopproit wondered if the building the two were heading for was where the Watchers kept their prisoners. Would these creatures also be taken there?

The thought of flight grew in him to an overwhelming insistence. Wasn't this spectacle enough to demonstrate how dangerous the forbidden city was? But for some reason Schopproit remained crouched where he was. He shivered although it was the type of pleasant morning he would have greeted with joy, back on the slope.

The slope! Schopproit's longing for the damp caves awakened anew. Why was he still cowering here to watch these brutal proceedings? He wouldn't have even wished such a fate on Tosnik.

Meanwhile the Watcher had come a few meters closer to the tunnel, but he would be passing it at still quite a distance. Schopproit did not believe he would be discovered. When the Watcher was directly opposite the tunnel

entrance, Schopproit became aware of the strange scent. His snout raised up to sniff the unusual aroma, which doubtlessly came from the captive creature. It was not an unpleasant odor – on the contrary, it awakened a strong sympathy for this being who seemed in no way to be like the Watchers.

Schopproit's eyes followed the Watcher until he disappeared into the other building. After that he was about to draw back when a consuming curiosity still held him there in his dangerous position.

And thus Schopproit came to see the whole event – how all of the men were taken out of the transmitter and brought to the building where the central brain was located. Of course he knew nothing about all these things. He was only aware that 5 creatures here were in the hands of the hateful Watchers.

It was almost full daylight when Schopproit plugged up the hole again and made his way back with a sorrowfully lowered snout.

4.

BIGMAN PLAYS HIS HAND

It was much worse than Loden had expected. For many long years the positronic brain had been lord and master of this base, and in a typically positronic way it had developed a logic of isolationism. Although this was completely correct within its own frame of reference, anywhere outside the stronghold it would have been considered insane.

In spite of the discovery that the Mechanica builders had installed a type of symbol transformer in the interrogation equipment, Dr. Bigman was having his troubles. It hadn't taken him long to establish a basis of inter-translated communication, but to little avail. He finally turned away from the communicator panel with a sigh. Albright responded with a shrug of his shoulders.

A metallic voice sounded from the hidden loudspeaker of the symbol transformer-or at least Loden assumed it was a loudspeaker.

"Those from the stars are no more," it said. "For long the transmitter has not been in use. Therefore, from where have you come?"

Drops of sweat glistened on Dr. Bigman's bald head. He turned to Loden. "Emmet, you take a whack at it!" he ordered.

Loden's mind had been working the whole time. He knew very well that the scientist had not made any headway at all. All explanations had been rejected so far by the positronic, even in their broadest outlines.

"Those from the stars did not live alone," said Loden, clearly and distinctly. "We were with them. Now we are here to carry on their work."

"Those from the stars could emerge from the transmitter without help," retorted the voice. "They knew all about this base. If you are from them, why can you not operate the things you have constructed?"

When Loden saw Dr. Bigman wipe his bald pate with his synthetic hand, he had a fantastic inspiration. "We come from *beyond* the stars," he declared.

He heard Bigman gasp and then speak rapidly to him. "Drop that nonsense, Loden! You don't know at all where it can lead!"

Obviously the positronic had become uncertain as a result of Loden's explanation because it delayed its answer. While Loden calmly waited,

Bigman permitted himself a few choice words of profanity over his subordinate's method-yet he did not order him to desist.

After a while, the positronicon continued. "It makes no difference where you come from. Only those from the stars have a right to enter this base. Other than they, only mechanical life may exist here."

Before Bigman could interrupt him, Loden said quickly, "We are mechanical life from beyond the stars."

"What the devil is he saying!?" Bergmann blurted out in consternation. Bigman, to whom the question was directed, spouted a stream of unintelligible words until Loden finally heard him say, "No! No, Loden! You can't do that!"

"It won't buy us a thing!" yelled Albright. Loden did not wait for my more objections. In two steps he reached Bigman and rolled back the sleeve from his synthetic hand, making the prosthesis fully visible. "Here is the proof," he said. "We are mechanical."

To Loden's relief, Bigman ceased resisting him. Instead, he resolutely raised his exposed hand. "That's right!" he declared. "We are mechanical, and we are capable of rusting!"

Loden feared the scientist had carried the idea too far when the positronicon finally announced that it would have been the prisoners' claims investigated.

Bergmann snickered somewhat helplessly. "What'll we do if we're all examined?" he wanted to know. "The only metal parts I can show anybody is a few gold fillings."

"The brain will be satisfied with an examination of the Chief," answered Loden. Bigman glanced suspiciously at the flickering of lights on the observation panels. "Emmet," he said slowly, "was that one of your ingenious inspirations again?"

"I don't know, Doc," replied Loden calmly. "Anyway, it was our only chance to convince the positronicon of our harmlessness. As for the bit about being from beyond the stars, the brain has no way of grasping that concept even symbolically. That should help us because there's no way for the machine to really check it out. The brain will be satisfied with a superficial examination of you."

"How can you know that, Emmet?"

"This thing has a fixed concept of organic and mechanical life, but it's limited to that which comes 'from the stars.'" Loden paused a moment to

think. "The brain won't know how to handle our explanation of where we came from, so it will have to assume that we're different from normal mechanical life, because we come from a place that doesn't fit anywhere in its frame of logic."

Albright pensively weighed the universal wrench in his hand. "Considering it was a crazy-sounding idea, you sure laid it on with a straight face," he said.

"That's the scary part of it!" interjected Shawlee nervously. "Loden can't know anything about how these machines are going to react!"

"Not exactly," Loden admitted. "Doc, can you explain to these men that our only chance of survival is to channel the brain's logic into our framework of thinking? We can't get anywhere with arguments that are only reasonable from our side but are falsely stated where the positronicon is concerned."

Bigman carefully rolled his sleeve back in place. "Emmet has forgotten to add one thing," he said. "That is we've committed ourselves. We can't change it now. Either Loden's lie will be believed, or —"

Bergmann was standing closest to the sentinels at the door. He called out suddenly. "I think the Chief's examining commission is here!"

Loden whirled around to see a strange-looking robot roll into the room. It was long and wide, less than one meter in height. On the front end of the contraption was a trapezoidal structure mounted on a number of retractable arms and linkages. A clamp-like apparatus hung over this which was fastened to the center of the robot. Attached to the trapezoid were two diagonally-positioned strips of metal that were like concave channels. In the back of the machine was a maze of instruments, cables and controls.

Bigman had drawn back to the positronicon's control panels. On his face was a mixed expression of skepticism and scientific curiosity. When Loden saw the weird-looking robot he began to regret his idea. Even before anything happened, he perceived one terrible flaw in his plan. Neither he nor the others could predict which one of them the positronicon would examine. Although Bigman with his primitive synthetic hand would have the best chance of passing the test, there was no way of determining that he was the principal candidate.

Albright seemed to see by Loden's expression that something was wrong. As the latter went around the machine, Loden avoided his questioning look.

"Doc!" shouted Loden. "The robot has to examine *you*, do you understand?" Bigman's eyes narrowed. Perhaps he had been having the

same thoughts but he did not answer him. With a determination that invoked Loden's admiration, the little man approached the robot. "We are ready!" he stated calmly.

The positronicon itself remained silent, but immediately the new robot's clamps moved toward Bigman, who waited motionlessly, and then grasped him. Loden felt his stomach going into knots. Bigman's face tensed grimly but he made every effort to hold on to his courage. The machine swung the scientist around as if he had been a feather. He was pressed down and placed between the concave channels.

Albright raised his wrench and made a move as if to attack the thing, but Bigman must have seen him out of the corner of his eye.

"Stay where you are, Albright!" he cried out. The two concave channels began to close. Bigman was held in the clamps so that he couldn't move. The look he gave Loden expressed his anger concerning his co-worker's brilliant idea. Loden could only slump his shoulders and watch helplessly as the machine gripped Bigman securely, turned around, and rolled back down the long passage.

Without any emotion in his voice, Bergmann commented, "Well, there's the result of your brainstorm, Emmet. That's the last we'll see of the little guy."

Loden clenched his fists while the blood rushed into his head. Dr. Bigman had waited almost four years for him to come up with another ingenious idea like the Trounhart circuit but now this! Nobody could actually say whether or not his idea was the best of several bad choices, but it was highly probable that it would result in Bigman's death.

With burning eyes, Loden glared at the glittering facade of the positronicon. Gradually the momentary void in his brain began to be filled by the awful specter of guilt.

*

When the clamps gripped him and lifted him, Bigman stubbornly decided to carry through the experiment to its end. This was why he had stopped Albright from charging at the machine like a madman. Armed only with a wrench he wouldn't have had a chance.

The special robot's grip on him was not painful as long as he didn't struggle. He had no idea of what awaited him in the next few minutes, but he was sure that it wasn't going to be pleasant.

Finally the robot rolled out into the passageway and left the other four men behind with their troubled thoughts. While pressed against the machine, Bigman tried to gather an impression of his surroundings. There was no doubt that they were located in another stronghold of the Mechanica beings. Until the planet plunged into its sun, the robots here would continue their meaningless labors, unless something happened in the meantime to put an end to their accustomed activities.

Bigman could not help thinking about Loden who had developed a remarkable initiative in the past few hours. What kind of a man was this who only went into action when he had no other alternative? In Bigman's opinion, Loden was a definitely phlegmatic type whom nothing could disturb, yet in front of the positronicon he had taken the affair into his own hands. Bigman thought keenly about it. This sudden change in Loden's behavior confused him more than the positronicon. Bergmann, Albright and Shawlee were characters he could clearly define and whose behavior he could essentially predict. Until now he had believed that this was also possible with Loden.

The robot came to a stop. Bigman turned his head to see where he was. They had arrived at the end of the passageway, almost at the exit leading into the outer foyer. But this time Bigman was transported in another direction. After a few seconds the machine got under way again as if it had stopped to get its bearings. Bigman began to suspect that the positronicon was a massive complex that was distributed throughout the entire base. If that was the case, its complexity might border on that of the legendary robot regent of Arkon. Bigman suppressed his scientific curiosity. Now everything depended on his lasting through this extraordinary situation. Not only his own life was at stake but also the lives of his companions.

The robot came into another room that was filled with incomprehensible devices. Bigman looked around him suspiciously. He felt the fear creep down his neck like an icy hand as the machine came to a stop.

"Are we there?" he asked in a trembling voice.

He received no answer but was released from the clamps. He stood up sluggishly. The entire room was bathed in brilliant light. The instruments gleamed with an antiseptic brightness-as in an operating room, Bigman thought suddenly.

He stood forlornly in the middle of the chamber. He was only a little man but in the course of his life he had accumulated a lot of knowledge that helped him to understand many things. In his inner self Bigman harbored an unspoken affection and sympathy for his fellow men under the pretense

of a spiteful malevolence. Now he was nothing but a lonely old man who was pitted against the overpowering functions of a positronicon.

He was startled when the whole room began to move. At first he thought it might be an illusion caused by the crazy reflections of the brilliant light, but the whole phantasmagoria he was witnessing was real. Perhaps a brain less scientifically trained than Bigman's might have succumbed when confronted with such a phenomenon, but he only stood still while the walls moved toward him. Out of their glistening surfaces stretched metallic grips, probing spirals and whirling wires.

At the sight of all four walls in motion, Bigman forced himself to think logically. From a spatial point of view such a thing was not possible. It was not the walls that were coming at him but countless things that had been concealed in their receptacles.

Now after an eternally long rest they were emerging, shimmering and sparkling with ominous cleanliness, and in eager haste. Bigman's whole body revolted at the thought that one of these things might cut into his living flesh. They were cold and smooth – feelingless instruments guided by an unemotional machine.

They enclosed him like a metal fence. They were going to touch him! Not only that – they would examine and test him. The cyberneticist stiffened as in electric shock when the first metallic tentacle touched him.

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Why of all times did he have to think now of how much Bergmann looked like a farmer? Loden watched the Swede as he paced restlessly back and forth like a caged tiger.

Albright checked his watch. "One hour," he said dejectedly.

Loden noted the other's pointed tone of reproach but kept silent. It was senseless to fight with the men. He recalled one of Dr. Bigman's favorite sayings, to the effect that all other scientists only accepted a cyberneticist with suspicion. Of course Loden had to admit that he had not been too much in love with his profession himself. A good cyberneticist had to be capable of enthusiasm. Above all he had to often be ready for things that he had thought impossible only moments before.

Bergmann interrupted his restless pacing in the control room. He looked at the positronicon's panels and then at Loden. "For God's sake, ask it what's happened to Bigman!" he demanded.

Loden answered wearily: "I've already explained to you that it's no use. The machine will inform us immediately when it has any results."

Bergmann waved an arm impatiently. "I told you to ask it!" he shouted.

Loden showed no reaction. "If it's so important to you, why don't you ask it yourself?" he queried, with obvious sarcasm. He knew very well that the Swede couldn't do anything with the symbol communicator.

"You got us into all this trouble!" complained Shawlee. "You should have let the little man do it his way!" He started forward but Loden shouted at him.

"If we fight among ourselves it'll spoil everything!" he warned.

But Shawlee was at his nerves' ends. His subconscious needed a catalyst for the hours of fear it had experienced. Loden knew that Shawlee was not to be stopped. Yet if they fought each other in front of the positronicon, Bigman might as well not have made his sacrifice.

As Shawlee passed in front of Albright, the engineer swiftly raised his wrench and brought it down on Shawlee's head. With a muffled grunt, Shawlee collapsed to the floor.

"Thanks," said Loden.

Albright looked at him in a way that told him he had not acted out of sympathy. Perhaps he suspected that only Bigman could still help them now. "Do you think the brain will interpret that as fighting?" he asked.

"I hope not," Loden said to him reassuringly. "It all happened very fast."

Shawlee came to again and raised up slightly while shaking his head. Albright helped him to his feet. Shawlee carefully felt the bump on the back of his head. Although he said nothing he turned his back to Loden, who sighed with relief.

Albright became pensive. "Maybe the little man always gave us a rough time, but I'm worried about him. I almost think I've gotten used to him and his ways."

"Just wait till he's back with us," retorted Bergmann. "You'll soon get a snootful of him!"

Albright did not appear to be convinced, but he didn't answer. When Loden looked at his watch he saw that more than an hour had passed now since the robot had taken Bigman away. The longer the investigation went on, the poorer their chances were, because an extended examination would enable the brain to go into deeper details. On the other hand, in case the tests failed they'd probably hear about it sooner than they wanted to.

So here they were lost in some unknown corner of the universe five completely different men, each with his own thoughts and feelings. In the past few hours Loden had done a lot of thinking about the complexities of human relationships. The complexities made it seem almost impossible that humans could work hand in hand with members of fully alien races. And yet it was so. Didn't this point to the fact that all life in the galaxy had a common origin? Where had life come from? Where had it started? And what was equally important, how had it spread out?

In these past hours, life had become something more for Emmet Loden than a mere existence that one accepted without a second thought. Previously when he had lived without a care for its meaning, had he perhaps been happier? Or was happiness a relative thing that was in the mind of each living being as an entirely personal manifestation or experience, however paradoxical that sounded?

For Loden, at this moment it would mean happiness if Bigman were to come down the passageway to report his success to them. Undoubtedly Shawlee would have expressed his idea of happiness in still another way.

Suddenly the central brain made an announcement: "You have spoken the truth. You are free, and you are granted access to the base."

To Loden it came as a mental shock. It required several seconds for him to grasp the meaning of the positronicon's statement. Then an overwhelming sense of triumph flooded in upon him, sweeping away all other thoughts. He felt himself borne on a wave of enthusiasm. It was the same feeling he had experienced when he sold his improved Trounhart circuit.

"Does that mean we're actually free?" asked Albright uncertainly.

"We can move around in the base wherever we want to," announced Loden. "The brain has accepted us as mechanical life." But Loden's elation was being slowly shadowed by concern for Dr. Bigman. Why didn't the little man return?

Bergmann had evidently been thinking the same thing. "Where's the Chief?" he asked.

Loden made an obvious suggestion. "Now that we have permission to move around freely, we can go look for him."

Without waiting for them to agree with him, he went into the passageway. Bergmann joined him, and Albright and Shawlee followed.

They found Dr. Bigman at the end of the passage. He was sitting on a flat ledge. When the men approached him he stood up to meet them, and Loden saw that the cyberneticist was completely naked. But there was nothing

ludicrous or shocking about it. Bigman was merely a man with pale skin and knobbly joints.

In Bigman's voice was a vast weariness. "That was an infernal idea, Emmet. One of these days you're going to fry in hell for it." He nodded to Albright. "You're the next smallest to me," he said. "What are you waiting for, Albright? I'd say your underwear should be enough to cover me for now."

5.

THE SLOPE DWELLERS

By the time Schopproit came out of the brook with his pelt dripping wet, the slope dwellers had already gathered at the bank. Even Tosnik's fat face was recognizable among them. Schopproit shook himself, causing the water drops to fly from his furry hide.

Plusenkest, the Elder, waited until Schopproit came to stand before him. Sorenzeych stood beside him proudly, his eyes shining with joy over the success of one of his own group members.

Plusenkest snorted mightily and his greying whiskers began to twitch. "Where were you?" he demanded to know.

Although Schopproit's crooked little legs almost caved under him in awe, he replied in a loud voice: "I was in the forbidden city, Old One." He refrained from reporting his triumph in detail just now. That must be handled improper sequence so that with each telling the admiration of the slope dwellers would increase.

"Why did you dare to do that?" asked Plusenkest. It was said that in his youth he had visited the tunnel three times, and once he was supposed to have barely escaped from the Watchers.

Schopproit noted that Tosnik's fat body appeared to be shrinking out of naked fear. His sense of new power put him in a mood of forgiveness. He resolved to spare the thief. "It's time that I moved down the slope a bit," he said. "The night winds have destroyed my plant."

Everyone knew that this latter statement was a lie, including Plusenkest himself. It seemed to Schopproit that Sorenzeych's expression revealed still more pride. Schopproit shook himself again briefly and his stubby tail made a slight movement.

"How far," inquired the Old One, "have you extended the passage?"

"Into the city," he answered casually.

"Into the city!?" exclaimed Plusenkest in amazement.

"Yes," snorted Schopproit. "I broke through the end of the tunnel. It leads directly to an open space in the forbidden city. I could see the buildings at close hand."

There was a note of suppressed concern in Plusenkest's voice. "Did you

also encounter any of the Watchers?" he asked.

"Yes," growled Schopproit, remembering. "They passed by close to me. And I noticed they had five prisoners with them. Those beings are good. They have a pleasant smell."

The slope dwellers pressed closer now, not wishing to miss a single word of what Schopproit was telling them.

"Do you believe that the prisoners were from another slope?" inquired Plusenkest.

"The creatures were big, bigger than we are. But they were weaker than the watchers." Schopproit strained his brain in an effort to give an exact description to the old One. "I don't think they live on another slope. They looked strange and had no fur. Their faces were smooth and clear. The watchers must have captured them in the land beyond the sun."

Plusenkest was old and wise. He could draw certain inferences from the behavior of his kind. He detected the unspoken longing in Schopproit's words. But in addition to being wise he was also shrewd. Often enough he had been forced to realize that it was wrong to openly reveal his knowledge of the slope dwellers' secret desires.

So all he said was, "The Watchers will kill them." Schopproit was still too emotionally involved in his recent experiences to recognize the hidden subtlety behind Plusenkest's words. He felt a surge of defiance and his urge to help the five strangers continued to grow stronger. "They're still alive!" he cried out intensely. "We now have a completed passage to the forbidden city!"

There was a rising hubbub of whispering and snorting around him now. The elders who sat on the edge of the bank whipped the surface of the water with their short, flat tails. The atmosphere on the slope was charged with excitement.

But Plusenkest remained the master of the situation. A hefty snort sufficed to produce a tense silence. "What do you suggest we do?" he asked Schopproit.

Schopproit had worked out a bold answer in his mind but he did not get to express it. Sorenzeych interrupted with a sudden cry of warning. Schopproit turned around and looked past Plusenkest to the other side of the stream.

The five creatures who had been captured by the Watchers were approaching the bank in great haste. The wind carried their strange scent ahead of them. A deeper silence gripped the slope dwellers.

“Are they the ones?” asked Plusenkest in a low tone. Schopproit confirmed the old One’s question with a note of uncertainty in his voice. How had the creatures succeeded in escaping from the forbidden city? He began to tremble. Maybe these were not prisoners after all. They might be allies of the watchers who were coming to take revenge for the completion of the tunnel. Schopproit’s pride and triumph took flight before an invasion of fear.

The first of the strangers had reached the shore. Without hesitation he jumped into the stream and began to wade across it.

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Emmet Loden waited until Dr. Bigman had put on Albright’s underwear, shirt and socks.

“There!” said Bigman with satisfaction. He slapped his narrow chest. “Now we can turn our attention to our further plans.”

Evidently, thought Loden, the little man had not lost any of his determination.

“How did the examination go, Doc?” Bergmann wanted to know.

Bigman waved a hand depreciatively. “I had fair success in always moving my synthetic hand to the right places at the right time,” he explained. “It was no picnic. You can be glad that I’ve always been satisfied with this primitive make of prosthesis. A more modern one would certainly not have helped much because it would have been too lifelike.”

“So can we move around without any danger?” asked Albright.

“Don’t jump the gun,” Bigman cautioned. “I’ll tell you what we can do. We have to leave this base as fast as possible. There’s no doubt that these robots will make a thorough analysis of the data they’ve turned up. I probably don’t have to tell you how that will turn out. By the time the positronicon sees through our bluff, we have to be out of here.”

“But where should we go?” asked Shawlee, sounding dejected.

“We are on a totally alien planet. We were lucky that it has a breathable atmosphere.” Bigman made a sweeping gesture with his arm. “Our first objective must be to save our lives. Once we’ve gotten that far we can turn to other matters. Primarily we have to find a way of surviving on an unknown world. Undoubtedly this planet must be somewhere on the edge of the galaxy. I’m convinced that a hypercom transmitter must be installed somewhere on this base. Finding that will be our next step. Once we’ve

located a refuge outside the station, we'll come back here secretly. Presumably this stronghold was also set up to defend the Mechanica people from the Laurins."

Loden interrupted. "That means we can continue here with the work we started on Surprise."

"Absolutely correct," confirmed Bigman. "Perhaps here we'd have more success in looking for any signs of weapons that are usable against the Laurins."

Shawlee chuckled suddenly. "Even if you find something, Doc who are you going to tell about it?"

"That problem is secondary at present," answered Bigman irritably.

To Loden the plans of their superior seemed to be quite logical, although he didn't think there'd be much chance of investigating this base. More experience men than they had died even under more favorable conditions because they couldn't find their way in an alien environment. Bigman seemed to have a very unrealistic concept of the time and pains necessary to survive on an unknown oxygen world. Each step into the unpenetrated fastnesses of Nature could be the last one.

Loden thought of the death of Allan Cruikshank and four soldiers whose spacecraft had crash-landed on Vorntoorg. They believed they had found Paradise until the Vorntoorg worm killed them. All they had to do was avoid eating one particular fruit in which the worm was accustomed to laying its eggs. There were countless examples to show that the friendliest-looking world could turn into a living hell.

Loden decided not to mention any of his misgivings to Bigman. He made up his mind to leave the little man to the further direction of their original plan. On the other hand he himself would keep a close eye on their new environment, to at least avoid any threats of catastrophe.

"We're going to leave the vase now," declared Bigman. "It isn't advisable to wait any longer."

"Let's hope the robots will let us leave," cautioned Bergmann.

Bigman didn't answer him. He adjusted his incomplete clothing with a few tugs here and there, and then he started out. When they emerged from the building a salmon red sun shone down on the stronghold.

Loden paused to look around. From one of the structures came a thumping and pounding sound as if machinery were in operation there. Otherwise everything was quiet. No robots were in sight.

“Onward!” ordered Bigman grimly. In another situation he might have looked ridiculous in his scanty covering of socks, underwear and shirt, but the man’s nerve were too much on edge to waste any thoughts on Bigman’s appearance.

They moved along between two large, long shed like structures. The temperature was pleasant and there was an uncontaminated freshness in the air. When they came out from behind a further building, they encountered the wall. Constructed of metal, it was 10 ft high and without a single opening.

“So that’s why they let us run loose with no interference,” observed Bergmann grimly. “The big brain knows we can’t get out. This wall is sure to surround the whole base.”

A sense of foreboding crept over Loden. If the robots had built a wall like this it could only mean there was something on the outside that they didn’t want on the inside. Perhaps it would be better for them to stay in the domain of the robot central.

However, Bigman didn’t seem to entertain any such fears. “We’ll follow the wall until we come to the exit,” he directed them, as if it were a foregone conclusion that the exit had to be somewhere.

Loden couldn’t keep quiet any longer. “Doc, what do you think the purpose is for this wall?”

Bigman’s almost colorless eyes glared at him. It was a look that had intimidated the scientist’s co-workers for years. It meant “red alert.” “I presume that the Mechanica beings had a great need for protection,” he answered. “Think of Surprise where they located their installations under the ground. Here it’s another situation. The result of the exaggerated precautions of an over-cultivated race.”

Loden was not convinced but it was useless to contradict the little man. So they moved along the wall for several minutes until Bigman brought them to a halt.

It might be well to just take a look over the wall,” he suggested. “Emmet, you climb onto Bergmann’s shoulders and look at the lay of the land out there.”

It seemed a reasonable request to Loden. He waited until the swede had positioned himself and then with Albright’s support he climbed onto the scientist’s broad shoulders. He drew himself up to the top of the wall and looked out. Beyond extended an area that was barren of vegetation, obviously a zone deliberately kept by the robots. Everywhere there were

scorched traces of frequent burn-off. The positronicon maintained a large strip of land meticulously clean.

A death zone! – Loden thought suddenly.

There simply had to be a reason for these security measures. Beyond this desolate land strip began a flourishing vegetation. Loden recognized low hills in the background as well as larger bushes and trees. Here and there he thought he caught a movement among the plants that could be a hint of animal life, but then again it could have been an illusion.

“Come on down!” grunted Bergmann. “You’re not exactly a featherweight!”

Loden jumped to the ground.

“Well?” snapped Bigman curtly.

“Outside the base the robots have made a kind of death zone,” Loden reported. They’ve burned back all nearby vegetation. I don’t like it, Doc. It looks as if they wanted to secure themselves against outside attacks.”

“Go on – continue!” urged the cyberneticist.

“Beyond that begins the vegetation-about medium height-and the land is slightly hilly.”

“Were climbing over the wall,” announced Bigman. “Bergmann will remain behind to boost the rest of us over until we’re on the other side. Then we’ll make a rope out of our shirts and throw it over so that Bergmann can follow us.

Loden spoke softly. “Wait, Doc. Maybe it would be better if we stayed inside the base. This flight is only going to make the positronicon suspicious and will probably lead to a closer examination. We do don’t know what we’re facing out there. How will we ever come back here to search for what were after?”

Bigman raised a pedantic eye at him. “One ingenious idea per day is quite sufficient, Emmet,” he said softly. “Now you leave the running of this operation to me.”

Loden bit his lip and remained silent. He watched while the cyberneticist clambered up on Bergmann, looking actually grotesque in his borrowed underwear. It was a considerable effort for the little man to swing himself onto the wall and let himself down on the other side, but finally they heard him land on the ground.

“All right, Shawlee!” they heard him call over. “You’re next!”

After Shawlee, Albright followed. Loden held back a moment as if hoping

that Dr. Bigman might retract his orders; then he pulled himself up on Bergmann once more. He swung onto the top of the wall and jumped down on the other side. There in the open flat area he felt somehow nakedly exposed to observation.

They pulled off their shirts and knotted them into a rope. Albright weighted one end of it with the wrench and then slung it over the wall. Bergmann signaled with a tug on the other end that he was ready. They all held onto the primitive line, and quickly Bergmann's face became visible at the top of the wall.

He grinned down at them and swung himself over. Albright received his wrench back, and the others were finally able to put their shirts back on. When they looked about them they could see in unscorched places that the actual soil was of a deep brown color.

"So now let's go!" order Bigman.

Loden looked suspiciously toward the place where the vegetation began.

Albright grimaced, lifting his wrench in a mock threat. "Our one might weapon!"

"What do you think you're going to slay with that?" asked Bergmann sarcastically.

"Anything smaller than a lion," said Albright dryly.

As they crossed over the barren strip of land, now and again Bigman looked behind him as if he feared the robots might start in pursuit at any moment. However, they reached the edge of the scrub forest without being molested. As soon as they found enough foliage to offer concealment from observation, Dr. Bigman came to stop.

The land seemed peaceful and quiet, but that was the very thing that made Loden apprehensive. It took Bigman's voice to shake him from his troubled thoughts.

"Our first goal will be to find water," said the cyberneticist. "The ground is soft and damp, so it shouldn't be hard for us to discover a spring or a small stream. After that we'll see if the plant world offers any possibilities of sufficient nourishment. And if there are any small animals here, we'll build traps to catch them."

"Let's hope nobody gets the idea of setting a trap for *us*," muttered Loden uneasily.

Bigman was annoyed. "Emmet, why is it you've become so despondent all of a sudden?" he asked. "Your continuous objections and complaints do

very little for the optimism of this group.”

Loden realized that the little man was right. There was Shawlee, for example, hanging onto every word as if it were a prophecy. There was no sense in needlessly taxing the man’s nerves. Of course Bergmann and Albright were fearless enough, but it was better to focus their attention on the task of survival rather than continually talk about possibly existing dangers. Perhaps, Bigman was fully aware of what could happen to them and was trying through his own decisiveness to demonstrate to the men that they should not give up.

“We should give our new home a name,” suggested the little man in a somewhat conciliatory tone.

Without being more acquainted with their environment, they dubbed the unknown planet “Fossil.” Then Albright took the lead and they continued onward. The grass that grew everywhere between the bushes and trees was coarse and sharp. Protected only by Albright’s socks, Bigman’s feet were soon cut and bleeding. Loden was the closest behind him and could see his painful struggle to make headway.

Wait, Doc!” he called out. “I’ll give you my shoes.”

Bigman did not stop. “It’s too late for that,” he said over his shoulder. “It should only burden my feet unnecessarily. I just hope we’ll soon find water so I can soak them and cool them off.”

Finally they talked him into using all available socks in the group, pulling them over the torn pair so as to offer some degree of protection. Later, Loden reckoned they had been on the march for half an hour when Albright raised an arm.

“Water,” he announced laconically.

When Loden listened intently he also heard the splashing of water against rocks and pebbles. The sound revived him but at the same time it reawakened his vigilance. Water also meant life. On all worlds, living creatures gathered where there was water. In fact, he reflected, in the primordial periods of their evolution, all oxygen-breathing species had originally crawled out of the water, after which they continued gradually to develop further-and in rare cases, to build a level of intelligence.

It seems to be over there,” said the Swede.

Bigman looked ruefully at the torn lumps of rags on his feet which had once been stockings. When Loden thought of the pain the other was going through, all of his fear of the nearby stream vanished.

Without waiting for orders, Albright went on, nor did anyone make a move to stop him. When they had all moved on a few more meters, Loden could smell the water. Albright jumped into the air and waved his arms. They had reached the crest of a low hill. Below them they saw the brook flowing through a narrow valley. The stream wasn't very wide but the water flowed swiftly and glittered in spots where a few stones touched the surface, causing little ripples and small rapids. Albright hopped down the slope ahead of them. He was the first one to reach the bank, and without hesitation he sprang into the water.

"Be careful!" Loden cried out. He had been concentrating on the water, but now he glanced across at the other side of the stream.

That was when he saw them!

They had assembled there as if they expected this arrival of the humans. Although they were not very large, their eyes spoke a definite language. Loden moved forward in a kind of hypnosis. It was only when he reached the bank that he pointed across to bring the attention of his companions to the creatures.

He could not predict what would happen in the next few minutes, but one thing he knew with an absolute certainty. The creatures on the opposite shore were intelligent!

*

Albright had almost crossed the stream when he stopped so suddenly that it was as if he had bumped into an invisible wall. Then for a time nothing at all seemed to happen. There was an uncanny silence on either bank, and even the babbling of the brook seemed to lose itself in the distance.

Intelligence was the first to collect himself. He moved backwards from the far bank, making a series of wild splashes that startled Loden back to his wits. He heard Bigman's voice as if in a dream.

"Emmet, we have to show them that we have come with peaceful intentions."

Loden wondered how they were supposed to do that. Every hand movement could be interpreted as a hostile act by the natives. A word spoken too loudly could chase them away or excite them to attack.

"Albright!" called Bigman. "Stay in the middle of the stream! Perhaps the little fellows will understand the gesture!"

Albright gave an impression of uncertainty. It was obvious he would have

preferred climbing out of the brook. Nevertheless, he did what Bigman told him to do.

The waiting and watching started anew. The native creatures' eyes seemed to spy into every corner of Loden's mind. Then finally when the waiting had become almost unbearable one of the creatures glided into the water. It swam a considerable distance from Albright but also positioned itself in the middle of the stream.

Loden heard his own sigh of relief. The stranger swam back again to the other bank, as if inviting Albright to follow him. Bigman stepped in front of Loden and slid on the damp ground into the brook.

"Come on, Emmet," he said, with a cheerful self-composure that Loden had never seen in him before.

Loden shook himself mentally. They had to try, to communicate with these creatures. They wouldn't be able to withstand both the robots and the natives simultaneously. The furry, bluish creatures weren't any larger than badgers but they had gathered by the hundreds on the slope now. It would have been an unforgivable mistake to understand them.

Bergmann pulled Shawlee with him down into the brook in spite of his resistance. The natives shrank back somewhat when the 5 men climbed out of the water on their side. Immediately Bigman signaled his companions to stand still.

Loden could hear the creature making curious breathing sound, like snorting and snuffing.

"We'll call them Snoofs," said Bigman.

Since the natives did not understand him, they could neither approve nor disapprove the name. They kept themselves at a safe distance from the 5 men. For the first time Loden discovered the extensive system of caves that had been dug in the face of the slope. So the Snoofs also had their burrowing claws. It was evident that they were as much at home under the ground as they were in the water or on the surface.

As in the case of all intelligences who did not walk upright, the Snoofs had not developed any significant civilization. They had arrived at a certain degree of reason without knowing exactly what to do with it. Nevertheless, at some time or another on this planet an event must have occurred that had confronted them with the alternative to either become intelligent or extinct.

"I think both sides have been staring at each other long enough," said Bigman. "Now let's just try to make them understand what we're doing here."

They required three hours to make their intentions understandable to the Snoofs, but during that time they also won their confidence. There was only one thing they failed to do in spite of all their efforts, however. There was no way of explaining that they had come from the stars. For these fur-bearing creatures there seemed to be no other world than their own.

TUNNEL TO DANGER

Albright gave his makeshift shovel a decided shove to one side. Three Snoofs had just come out of the tunnel, dragging loosened earth on broad leaves.

“Listen, Doc,” Albright called out peevishly, “I tell you they’ll never be able to widen the passage enough for us to crawl through.”

Bigman crept awkwardly out of the tunnel entrance. His thin, borrowed clothing remnants were smeared with dirt. “You hold your tongue!” he snapped irritably. “Be thankful the Snoofs are helping us. Or maybe you’d prefer to crawl back over the wall into the base? In three or four days we’ll have the passage hollowed out enough to get clear to the station.”

Albright scratched the back of his head. His rapidly growing beard gave him a wild appearance. He had lost all similarity to the men’s fashion plates in *Playboy*.

“Three or four days,” he grumbled. “It’ll take twice that long to finish – provided we’re lucky and the place doesn’t cave in.”

Loden had been listening in silence. Finally he pulled Albright’s shovel out of the dirtpile and handed it back to him. “If we ever want to leave this planet, we’ll really have to work for it.”

Reluctantly, Albright continued his interrupted work. Bigman disappeared again into the subterranean passage. Bergmann and Shawlee had taken over the job of carrying away the loose dirt. It was too risky to pile it up near the entrance because there was as much danger now as ever that the robots could stumble across the tunnel during an inspection tour.

At present approximately 20 Snoofs were burrowing farther under the surface. It would have been useless to put more of them to work because they would have gotten in each other’s way. Loden continued to break branches to suitable size for tunnel joists and support beams. After a while he heard the typical breathing sound of a Snoof behind him. It was hard for him to differentiate one native from another, but this one who came out and now stood in front of him was easily recognizable. He seemed to be the oldest of his race, due to the signs of advanced age on his face and body.

“Go,” he said to Loden.

This was another problem that had come up-to learn the language of the Snoofs. However, the latter had succeeded in using a few words which the men had taught them.

Loden hesitated. He had long since noticed that the Snoofs regarded him as the leader of the Terrans. They always came to him with their concerns. Bigman had accepted this fact calmly because it was related to the identity of bodily scent, which seemed to play a big role among the Snoofs.

“Go,” repeated Plusenkest. He raised his snout, sniffing as if making sure that this was really Loden in front of him.

“Go,” agreed Loden finally.

The old One hobbled ahead of him to the primitive sketch of the tunnel that Bigman had made. He pointed with his nose to the place that indicated the entrance. Then he moved his snout a bit farther and made a mark.

Loden understood. The Snoof wanted to show him how far the work had progressed. A third of the tunnel had already been widened enough for a man to be able to crawl through it. The entire length of the passage was about 200 meters.

Loden was so absorbed in studying the sketch that he only heard Albright’s warning after the second shout. By the time he looked up the stocky fellow was running toward him. Plusenkest let out a snort of alarm.

“The robots!” cried Albright. “They’re coming from the station!”

Loden simply left the Snoof where he; was standing and hastily covered the short distance to the bushes which formed the borderline of the barren death zone. He saw 7 robots coming in their direction from the wall of the station. For a moment Loden was stunned. Now the thing that Bigman had feared was happening. The positronicon had seen through their masquerade and was sending out robots to either capture the men again or kill them.

Loden’s first thought was for Dr. Bigman. The scientist was in the tunnel where any warning would reach him too late.

Albright joined him, catching his breath. “What do we do now?” he asked.

Loden would have liked having a ready answer to the question. In the midst of growing desperation rose an urgency to protect the tunnel at all costs. “We have to distract them from the passage,” he said. “They must not discover it-if we don’t want to lose every chance we’ve got of getting off this planet alive.”

Albright scowled in disappointment as he watched the swiftly approaching machines. Suddenly he said, “I’ll divert them, Emmet.”

The cold calmness in his voice brought new fear to Loden. He had an urge to tell him “No, not you, Albright” – but he kept silent. Albright left him and disappeared into the underbrush. In a few moments Loden heard another sound and at first he thought Albright had come back. But it was Bergmann, who joined him without a word while glancing back over his shoulder.

“Where is Shawlee?” asked Loden gloomily.

“Gone!” growled Bergmann scornfully. “He hardly saw the robots before he was on the run for it!”

Without wasting another word on Shawlee, Loden mentioned that Bigman was still in the tunnel. “Albright’s trying to draw the robots’ attention in another direction.”

The Swede grunted skeptically. “That can cost him hide!”

The robots had about reached the center of the cleared strip of land. Their metal joints glittered in the sunlight. Loden thought he could hear the crunching of their heavy footsteps across the scorched ground, and now he could see that they were carrying weapons with them.

He looked back behind him. Not a single Snoof was in sight, but a blindman could make out the tunnel entrance. If the robots were to come in to this area they would stumble onto the very spot where the Snoofs had begun their labor of so many uncountable years. Of course Loden did not know that the tunnel’s breakthrough had only occurred after their arrival on Fossil. Nor did he know that often for decades no one had worked to extend the shaft.

“Our friends have gotten to safety,” he observed. “It would be too bad if we got them into hot water because of our own plans.”

Suddenly, about 100 meters from their position, a man came charging out of the shrubbery at the edge of the barren strip. He waved his arms wildly and shouted at the robots.

“Albright!” exclaimed Bergmann.

Loden shook his head in surprise. “That’s not Albright.”

Bergmann strained to take a close look and then whispered incredulously: “You’re right, Emmet! By all the planets – it’s our yellow belly Shawlee!”

It seemed almost as if the technician wanted to put on a dance because he was hopping about like a madman.

“He’s too close to those robots,” growled Bergmann. “I never have quite been able to figure him out.” The latter remark sounded almost like an

apology.

By now the robots had discovered Shawlee and they immediately changed the direction of their march. When he saw he had caught their attention he howled at them like a coyote.

In the same moment Albright came back with a faint grin on his face. "Seems like somebody's doing the job for me," he said.

The robots accelerated their pace. Shawlee still waited another moment and then he began to run away in a direction that was opposite that of the tunnel. The first beam shot flashed on the edge of the scrub woods but failed to reach him. They heard his howling still, after he had vanished among the trees.

"He's still glad to get away," said Bergmann, "but now he's shown a little guts."

Somehow in this new environment they had all been changed. Loden gave up trying to think about it. He had learned that it was a mistake to make any final judgements of people. It was possible for anybody to break out of his mold.

In a few minutes, Bigman came out of the passage. When Loden reported to him what had happened it was only another reason for the cyberneticist to goad his companions to work faster.

In the late evening Shawlee came back with torn clothing. They took him to the brook and treated his wounds as necessary, but no one asked him about his pursuers. Nor did he say a word about them himself. Hg only smiled in a satisfied way.

Two days later the tunnel was ready.

*

Dr. John Bigman surprised his co-workers with a solid plan whose details revealed that he had already put a lot of thought into it.

He stood at the tunnel entrance surrounded by the other men and several dozen Snoofs. "Only three of us will go into the base," he explained. "Bergmann and Shawlee will stay behind with our little friends. Considering the superiority of the robots I'll admit it may seem absurd to think of covering the rear flanks, but we can't neglect any possibility of making a success of this operation."

Protests from Shawlee and Bergmann died away under a withering glare from the scientist. "We're going to try as quickly as possible to have a look

at the hypercom transmitter here,” he continued. “Once we’ve succeeded in getting off a message, we’ll return immediately.” He looked at Bergmann and Shawlee. “Don’t try to follow us before two days are up. We’re going to check out the possibility of turning off the station’s main power, which would put the robots and the positronicon out of action. In that case we’d be able to look around at our leisure.”

He cleared his throat penetratingly and shook hands with Bergmann and Shawlee. Albright saluted with his universal wrench and Loden only nodded. When they crawled into the passage, Loden discovered that they had an unexpected companion. A Snoof was following him.

“Hello, little buddy,” said Loden gently. “You can’t come with us-not where we’re going!”

In the pale light from the entrance Loden saw the Snoof lift his snout in a sniffing attitude. “Schopproit go!” said this one stubbornly.

“We can’t use you my friend,” said Loden regretfully. “The work we’ve got ahead of us is too dangerous.”

Schopproit did not understand him, but grave determination shone in his eyes as he snorted his reply: “Schopproit go!”

“Don’t hold us up any longer, Emmet,” called Bigman. “Let the Snoof come along with us.”

Loden cursed bitterly while the native creature joined them with a satisfied hissing sound. Bigman crawled on ahead and Loden and Albright followed with the Snoof. Although Loden knew that the passage passed in places within only a meter of the surface he was aware of a nervous lightness in his innards. For Bigman it was no problem to pull his slightly built form through even the narrowest places with ease. On the other hand Albright was often hindered by beams and uprights and had to force his way through with an effort. On the surface the distance to the station had appeared to be inconsequential, but here below it seemed to Loden to be unbearably far. Each time Albright would get stuck in front of him, Loden was seized with an irrational desire to crawl back. Due to the narrowness of the passage, he would have had to crawl backwards. Only in the middle of the tunnel was there a wide spot that the Snoofs had burrowed out as a turnaround place for the men.

This was where Dr. Bigman waited for Albright and Loden. The Snoof shook off the loose dirt from its pelt and crept between Loden’s legs.

“Half of it’s behind us.” Bigman’s voice rang in the darkness. “It’s going better than I had hoped.”

They heard a short, hard laugh from Albright but he refrained from speaking of his own problems.

“We’ll wait until it’s completely dark,” Bigman told them. “In the night we’ll be safer from the robots.”

Loden crouched in a curled up position. The breathing sounds of the Snoof seemed to be more familiar to him now.

“Let’s continue,” ordered Bigman, and immediately after that the others heard him receding.

“At some places along here I feel like a champagne cork coming through,” declared Albright. And then Loden heard him proceed onward.

“Go?” inquired the Snoof eagerly.

“Yes,” said Loden. “Go.”

Gradually Loden’s entire body became plastered with the cloying damp earth. No doubt in the light of day he would have appeared to be an unbelievable mess. He began to entertain the wish that he might appear in such garb in front of his well-groomed colleagues on Terra, to show them an example of “practical application.” The mud was even under his fingernails and in his hair, and it gritted between his teeth. His beard had become an encrusted mass.

Yet in spite of this Loden did not feel unhappy. For the first time in his life he was doing something with an inner enthusiasm. Even the heavy threat of the robots did not make him especially fearful. Ahead of him he heard a curse from Albright, whose jacket had caught momentarily on a tunnel brace. He waited patiently for the other to free himself. Perhaps Bigman had already reached the end of the shaft.

A clump of earth fell on the back of Loden’s neck and much of it trickled down his back. He spit mud from his mouth and crawled onward. After a while, Albright stopped again but this time intentionally.

“We’re there, Emmet!” he called back. “The little man has already climbed out of the shaft.”

Loden’s tension’s increased. By now it was night and he wondered how they’d be able to see their way around here in the interior of the base. He didn’t think they’d even succeed in setting foot inside the first building.

As Albright climbed out, his feet knocked dirt and stones back on Loden. “Everything’s in order, Emmet,” he whispered.

Loden crept through the last few feet of the shaft and poked his head out into the open. Immediately the cool night wind embraced him and played

with his hair and caused him to breathe a sigh of relief. Bigman and Albright were two flat shadows pressed against the ground. Loden drew himself out of the passage and let himself fall flat out next to the other two.

*

The stronghold remained quiet. Behind them the Snoof worked at camouflaging the shaft exit. From outside the wall came the cry of an unknown animal, wild and lamenting as if in terrible distress. Loden shuddered.

“It’s like a ghost town,” whispered Albright.

In fact it was, thought Loden. Everything had died out. Or were they supposed to consider the robots as living a kind of life which in erroneous response to anciently given commands still continued to maintain its meaningless existence? Actually the stronghold was dead, and the robots were a part of that death – moving relics of the demise of a mighty race.

Over everything there seemed to lie an invisible patina of long extinct life, a barely perceptible breath of the past which seemed to cling desperately to machines which had become useless. It wasn’t even the ghost of the extinct beings of Mechanica that lingered here in the buildings. It was little more than a vague memory, a fleeting fragment of thought that brushed over dead, motionless things of metal and plastic.

Yet in spite of it all, thought Loden, it was an incomparable monument.

Dr. Bigman’s voice reached him out of the darkness. “There don’t seem to be any robots outside the buildings,” he said. “Emmet, where do you think we should go first from here?”

The question came as a surprise to Loden because generally Bigman alone had handled the decisions. “I don’t think it makes much difference,” he answered, somewhat depressed. “Any of these building is as dangerous as the next one.”

In the darkness the small figure of the scientist was barely visible as he sat up. Loden looked up instinctively at the sky. It was a cloudless clear night, yet it was somehow different than such a night on Earth. At first Loden couldn’t quite figure it out, but then it suddenly came to him. There were hardly any stars in the sky. This could only mean that they were on the outermost edge of the galaxy.

An overwhelming sense of loneliness gripped him when he realized that they were lost in the stars or beyond them. He rationalized that he might as

well lie there where he was and do nothing more, because it wasn't going to help them any more to get into the buildings of the base. This consciousness of fathomless distances separating him from all the known worlds paralyzed his power of decision.

"Come on, Emmet!" urged Albright.

With an effort, Loden focused his attention back on events in his immediate environment. Even though they were lost in intergalactic space, he had no right to simply give up. The ridiculous hope that they might be able to find a hypercom transmitter and put it in operation would have to be enough to hold his own sense of security together. He followed Bigman and Albright quietly. Beside him the Snoof glided over the flat ground in blind dependence and trust.

Bigman suddenly grasped Emmet and drew him to one side. "I don't know if we can even get into one of the buildings," he said softly, "but if it's possible, Albright will stand watch at the entrance while we inspect the inside."

At first Loden nodded silently but then he realized that Bigman couldn't see this in the darkness. "Let's get started, Doc," he said.

They reached one of the buildings without incident. Loden groped his way along the outer wall until he reached the entrance door.

Immediately, Bigman was beside him. "Do you hear something?" he whispered. "No, nothing," Loden answered. His hands glided over the cold metal until he discovered the lock.

Albright sighed nervously. "Let's hope the robots don't happen to be here."

In Loden's opinion the robots were everywhere, but he kept his thoughts to himself.

"What's the matter?" asked Bigman. "Can't you get that thing open, Emmet?"

Loden carefully pressed the lock handle down and it yielded. His pulse began to race faster as he pulled the door inward.

Bigman muttered an order in a low tone. "You wait here!" he told Albright.

Loden began to perspire. A faint light came through the crack in the doorway.

There was no sound from inside. Only outside in the woods they heard the same animal cry as before.

"Don't stand there, Emmet," growled Bigman. "The light will give us away. Get inside quickly or the robots will see us!"

When Loden slipped inside he was aware of the Snoof gliding between his legs. Bigman was close behind him. Loden closed the door immediately from the inside while Albright remained outside in the night to stand watch. They found themselves in a kind of antechamber where there was only one machine, and that was apparently out of order. For the first time since the tunnel trip, Loden saw Bigman in a bright light and he had to grin. The cyberneticist was not unlike a primordial caveman in his appearance, and it occurred to Loden that he certainly couldn't look any better. When he looked down at himself he smiled helplessly. There wasn't much left of the former Emmet Loden.

Bigman tapped his shoulder, pointing toward the larger room beyond the foyer. "It's empty in there," he said in a tone of relief.

But for how long?-thought Loden Pessimistically. As they walked farther into the interior they left traces of dried earth and mud which fell from their torn clothing.

"Strange," said Bigman, indicating the various machines in the larger hall. "Have you ever seen anything like this before, Emmet?"

Loden did not answer, nor did Bigman appear to have expected a reply. The small scientist flitted over to a nearby work table like a hobgoblin, intent upon a machine that had been placed there.

He beckoned to Loden. "Come over here!"

Loden moved so quickly that he almost stumbled over the Snoof. The creature just barely managed to evade him. He, took another look at the door as if expecting Albright to burst in at any moment to announce the appearance of the robots. Then he finally came to Bigman and looked over his shoulder.

The scientist's zeal seemed to have caught fire. "Apparently what we have here is some kind of projection device. It's strange, Emmet – just have a look."

To Loden there was nothing mysterious about the device. He could not explain the other's sudden excitement.

Bigman pointed to the projector's built-in viewscreen. "Look here, Emmet. "What do you make out?"

"A metal shaft," said Loden reluctantly. "What's so unusual about it?"

Bigman scratched his unkempt beard and passed a hand over the screen. "This viewscreen is coupled to the projector," he said. "If there's a metal shaft on the screen, then the actual shaft must be located in front of the

projector.” He coughed slightly. “But neither you nor I can see such a shaft.”

“That doesn’t mean a thing,” said Loden. “It’s probably a slide or a fixation of the previous projection, which will blank out as soon as the next projection is made.”

Bigman grasped Loden’s hand and passed it in front of the projector. “And how, Emmet, do you explain that?” he asked.

Loden felt that his hand was being pressed against cool metal. He looked incredulously at the place where he could feel the solid material, because just where he could feel the resistance of the metal he could see nothing! “What does that mean?” he blurted out. In his excitement he forgot about his surroundings.

Bigman was exultant. “We’ve found what we were looking for so desperately on Surprise!” he exclaimed. “What we see here is nothing more than a larger version of the device the Posbis use to detect the presence of the Laurins. Although that shaft is invisible we can see it here on this projector screen.”

Loden’s sense of triumph was embittered by the thought that the ones who had such urgent need of their discovery were too far away from here for it to be of any use to them.

But Bigman went on enthusiastically. “Here we have a stronghold of the Mechanica people who were doing research on how to combat the Laurins. They worked here feverishly to find a detection device against the Invisibles.” He slapped his thin thigh resoundingly. “And they found it, Emmet – they’ve actually done it! “There’s no doubt in my mind that the Posbis detector device is just a more compact version of this projector.”

Loden smiled faintly. His superior’s enthusiasm was understandable, yet he had to make it clear to him that their discovery here on Fossil, the planet of the Snoofs, was completely useless. “It’s kind of sad, isn’t it, Doc? We’ve found a gadget that would enable us to defend ourselves against any further invasion of the earth by the Laurins – that is, if we could just manage to make this apparatus available to the right people.”

In an instant, Bigman was gravely calm again. His hands almost tenderly caressed the solid metal frame of the projector. “Emmet,” he said, “we’re going to see to it that this projector gets into the hands of Perry Rhodan, if it’s the last thing we ever do.”

“But stay with the basic facts,” admonished Loden. “I don’t see any possibility of taking this apparatus away from here. Even if we got it as far

as the caves of the Snoofs it still wouldn't be of very much use."

"Unfortunately you are right," admitted Bigman despondently.

Loden attempted to find some rhyme or reason to the irony of fate. They had thoroughly searched the infernally hot planet, Surprise, only to have it destroyed under them. Then chance would have it that they were diverted to Fossil, far from their own bases and ships yet here they had found the object of their search.

"Go?" came Schopproit's query from the floor.

When Loden looked into the creatures dark eyes he saw the flickering of fear. To the Snoof this place must have been far more scary and mysterious than it was to the Terrans, because his race had not been technologically endowed. "All right, sonny," Loden nodded. "Go!"

Schopproit snorted in relief but it was premature because just then Albright appeared in the hall. Loden tensed instantly.

"The robots!" yelled Albright. "They're coming!"

"Quickly!" exclaimed Bigman. "We have to get out of here!"

Albright kept moving toward them. "It's too late!" he gasped. "They'd get to the entrance faster than we could!"

Loden stooped down and plucked up the Snoof into his arms. The native creature could not run as fast as the men. Bigman ran farther into the interior of the hall. Loden heard the robots entering the other end but he did not look back. Bigman charged on ahead, a figure in tattered underwear that was full of mud and holes. They had to go around many machines that were in their path. The first energy flash of a ray weapon zipped close over Loden.

The robots were playing for keeps. That meant that the positronicon had seen through the deception with the synthetic hand. It now considered the base to be in danger, so it was doing everything necessary to destroy the 5 men.

The building they were in had been built in a fight angle so that when they turned the corner it gave them a few seconds of security from the weapons fire. Loden would have preferred to crawl under one of the machines but he knew the robots would soon find him there.

The floor suddenly glowed white hot next to Loden as the robots turned the corner and immediately opened fire. By this time the men had forgotten all about the projector device. Now they were running for their lives. Albright took a bad fall and wounded his leg. With a painful effort he had to drag

himself under a machine. Loden knew there could be no purpose in stopping to help the engineer. He could only hurry onward with the Snoof pressed close to him. When Bigman stumbled to the floor in front of him and lay there quietly, Loden felt a cold chill come over him.

There was another flash and a scorching blast of heat just missed him. In blind desperation he threw himself forward. The Snoof cried out in fear and terror, possibly also because of the tight pressure of Loden's hands. The marching steps of the robots seemed to thunder in Loden's ears like a roll of drums. Before him the floor exploded. He dodged sideways, hit the wall and slipped or slid onwards a slight distance. In the process he lost his grip on the Snoof who fell to the floor with a desperate, squealing outcry. The wall Loden faced was covered with instruments and controls. For some unknown reason the robots had ceased their fire but the trampling of their metal feet came closer swiftly.

Loden looked around frantically. There was no way out anywhere. Farther along in the hall, Bigman lay on the floor as if dead. Albright was nowhere to be seen. Loden's head fell helplessly against the cold wall. He felt overcome by exhaustion and nausea. Spots danced in front of his eyes. Even as he fell he reached out, and he caught hold of a lever which he pulled downward with him.

Then he fell unconscious near a whimpering Schopproit, who crept in blind fear under the motionless body of the Terran.

SURVIVAL SWITCH

Loden's thoughts returned sluggishly to the surface of consciousness. He didn't dare to think that he was still alive. He opened his eyes. He was surrounded by pitch darkness. He was lying somewhere on the floor. His groping hand found the wall. He blinked in confusion into the darkness. Could he still be in the same place where he had fallen?

Where was Albright? Where was Bigman? And above all where were the robots?

He groaned and got up, just as a snuffling voice reached his ears from the floor.

"Go?" queried the Snoof.

Loden bent down in relief and stroked the native creature's fur. At least he wasn't alone here. For a few minutes he stood there until finally he was able to start collecting his thoughts. Something had happened while he was unconscious that he couldn't figure out. There was no sound from the robots, and the lights had gone out. Had they left him lying here because they thought he was dead? He rejected the idea. There had to be another explanation.

With outstretched arms he moved slightly away from the will. In the ghostly silence he was startled by the sound of his own footsteps. He stopped and listened. The Snoof pressed fearfully against his legs.

"Hey, Doc!" he called out in a low voice. "Can you hear me?"

"Emmet!" There was an obvious note of relief in Bigman's voice, "I thought one of the robots might be sneaking around here." He fairly sobbed in his excitement.

"Ever since the lights went out I haven't heard a sound out of those monsters!"

"Do you know how long I was unconscious?"

"More than two hours. Maybe even longer. I didn't dare to move the whole time."

Loden grinned to himself. "Where is Albright?" he asked.

He could almost see the shrug of the other's narrow shoulders in the

darkness. "I don't know," said the little man. "Let's hope his wound isn't too serious."

Meanwhile Loden had oriented himself to the sounds and had determined where Bigman must be standing. When he stretched out his arm and touched the scientist he felt the other react with a start. "What the devil, Emmet!" complained Bigman. "Your hand is as cold as a frog!"

Loden mumbled an apology. Suddenly he began to remember all that had been going on before he lost consciousness. It occurred to him that he had grasped a lever and pulled it down. Bigman listened in silence when he told him about it.

"Emmet, I think you shut down the power station by accident. That would be a logical explanation for the darkness and the disappearance of the robots. Probably that lever knocked the central brain out of action." Bigman chuckled to himself. "If that's really true, then we can congratulate ourselves. The robots won't be able to stop us from exploring the entire base."

"We have to find the exit," urged Loden.

They groped through the darkness until they stumbled against something that was lying on the floor in front of them. Loden stood still.

They went around the fallen robots who were no longer under the control of the positronicon. It required some time to make their way in this manner until they found the exit. When they finally came outside, the light of dawn had come to Fossil. Loden left the building with a deep sigh of relief.

Bigman clapped him on the shoulder. "I knew you'd prove yourself sooner or later, Emmet," he said amicably. "It wasn't all for nothing that I practically slid you through these years."

"I'm sorry for all that, Doc," murmured Loden crestfallen.

Bigman waved off the whole thing. When they moved out of the shadow of the building, a shadowy figure came hobbling toward them unexpectedly. It was Albright, who waved his wrench at them.

"I was starting to fear that the robots had captured you," he called out to them. "What's it all mean Doc? The whole base seems to have gone dead."

The small scientist drew himself up a little straighten. "By an accident, Emmet shut off the power supply to the central control. That was our salvation. As long as we don't change anything we can move around here and do as we please."

When Albright came close to him, Lodge saw that his leg wound was a bad

one. The others disheveled face was haggard from pain and over-exhaustion. Loden felt sympathy but he told himself that Albright deserved his respect even more.

“Now all we have to do is find that hypercom station,” said Albright.

Loden didn’t want to discourage him so he kept quiet. He would have had to tell him that to send out a radio message it would be necessary to turn on the main power again. That meant that as soon as the station was reactivated the robot pack would be after them-even from the moment that they started to send their distress call out into the void.

*

Bigman took the time necessary to find the gate in the wall of the stronghold. Since there wasn’t the slightest danger of being held up or disturbed in the process, they were able to separate and look in two directions. Loden knew that the little man did not intend to subject Albright to another strenuous crawl through the tunnel. Finally, Bigman found the gate which responded easily to manual control.

It was broad daylight by the time the three men and the Snoof left the station. When they reached the area of the slope dwellers they found that Bergmann and Shawlee were overly anxious about them. Neither of the two men had seriously counted on Bigman having any success. Loden had to fill them in on what had happened while Bigman attended to Albright’s leg wound.

“Now everything depends on our finding the hyper-transmitter,” Loden concluded. “If we can get it going we can send out a distress signal.”

Bergmann looked troubled. “Emmet, you said you shut down the whole station. What you’re saying is that no equipment tied in to the main power is operative now.”

“That’s right,” Loden confirmed reluctantly.

Bergmann shook his head and turned to Shawlee. “What do you think, Ron? Wouldn’t that also knock out the transmitter?”

Shawlee agreed with the swede. “Sure it would. Didn’t you think of that, Emmet?”

While washing Albright’s wound with fresh water, Bigman had not missed any of this. He finally straightened up from his task. “Once we’re sure the hypercom is going to work, and when we have our message ready, that’s when we’ll turn on the station’s power,” he announced.

Bergmann looked at him grimly. "And that's when the positronicon will sic all its robots on us," he added. "Not only that – the central brain will also try to bring the radio transmitter under its control."

"Sooner or later it will do that after the power is on." Bigman worked at his Van Dyke, attempting to smooth it out. "Whatever length of message the transmitter can send out within that space of time will have to be enough. For our part, all we can do is try to retreat deeper into the bushes."

"Not very good odds, Doc," commented Bergmann.

"I wish there were a better way," said Bigman. "There must be at least 500 robots at this base. Aside from the fact that it would take days to find them all, we'd never be able to damage them enough so that at least some of them couldn't chase after us anyway."

Loden also saw another problem. It was Albright. It was impossible to expect him to join them in their flight, considering his wounded condition. The engineer already had a fever. His leg would have to receive medical attention soon if he didn't want to lose it.

In an aside to the others he asked in a low tone: "What do we do with Albright?"

Bigman glanced at Albright where he lay on a bed of leaves. Several Snoofs had gathered around him as though they wished to help him by merely being present. "We'll let the Snoofs hide him," he answered.

"But the danger of his being discovered is still very great," warned Shawlee. The station isn't very far from this slope."

Bigman's features reflected a fixed determination. "If need be we will have to regard Albright as expendable," he said sternly.

In spite of Bergmann's growth of beard it was obvious that his face had turned a shade whiter. "How can you dare to even think of a thing like that!" he almost snarled.

Bigman met his stare coldly. "I happen to be thinking of many billions of human beings whose existence may depend on whether or not they can obtain a detection device against the Laurins in time."

Bergmann's jaw muscles knotted visibly, but he said nothing and turned away. He knew that although such logic might seem to be inhuman at first glance it was incontrovertible in the long run. None of them had a right at this stage to think of their own problems. The entire fate of humanity might hinge on their being able to cope with this situation. Probably Albright himself would have been the first to insist that he was expendable, if

anyone had asked him.

When the tension among them had subsided, Bigman issued his instructions. He ordered a three hour period of sleep for everyone. After that, with the exception of Albright, they would return to the base to search for the hypercom transmitter. Once they had found it, they would have to master its alien features of operation, make the necessary adjustments for their purposes and prepare an automatic distress signal. One of them would then have the difficult task of turning on the main power at just the right moment.

After that, all they could count on was speed.

When Loden sank back on his bed of leaves he figured that he would be the one to have to turn on the main power switch. The thought did not disturb him particularly, yet he was gripped by an inner tension that would not permit him to sleep.

When Dr. Bigman finally announced it was time to go, he hadn't so much as closed his eyes. They said their goodbyes to Albright but his fever was so bad that he failed to even recognize them. This time Bigman insisted that no Snoofs would go along. It was too difficult to explain the danger of the mission to the furry creatures.

Loden calculated that it was early afternoon when they finally got under way. The small salmon-red sun shone warmly in the cloudless sky. The land lay quiet and peaceful before them.

The activation of a single lever was going to change all that . . .

*

Toward evening they found the hypercom station in the 8th building they investigated. Inside the base a twilight dusk was coming on, which didn't leave them much time for tinkering with the equipment. Its control panel was comprehensible but their main difficulty was going to be adjusting the output frequency to that of the Solar Fleet. However, they had discovered some star chart information concerning their location, so this helped solve the problem of how to aim the directional beam toward star cluster M-13.

Before they had properly gotten into their work, it was already dark. Loden was convinced that they wouldn't be able to go any farther until mid-morning at the soonest. Reluctantly, Bigman finally gave the order to cease working.

As well as they could they made arrangements for getting a night's rest.

Loden had to settle for an uncomfortable spot near the equipment. He was still awake when he heard the others' heavy breathing nearby. When he finally dozed off he was plagued by troublesome dreams. The main ingredient of his nightmare was a giant lever that continued to appear before him. He dreamed that he pulled and pushed at the lever with all his strength but could not budge it.

In the middle of the night he woke up bathed in sweat. He opened his eyes. Other than the breathing of the other men, there was a deathly silence in the place. A chill sense of the unknown crept over Loden. He had never believed in ghosts or other such nonsense, but here in the heart of the stronghold he knew a man could quickly learn how to be afraid. However, the creatures who had once inhabited this place had been dead long since. Only their robot creations still moved about in these buildings when the power was on. Comforted by these thoughts, Loden dozed off again. He awoke when Bigman gently shook his arm.

"Come on, Emmet," urged the cyberneticist. "We want to get started now."

It was morning again. Loden stretched himself and got up. Bergmann and Shawlee were already at work. As they all worked on the equipment it made the time seem to pass more quickly. They worked without interruption in fact, there wasn't any time for rest breaks. Loden would never have believed that it would be so difficult to operate the radio transmitter of an alien race. It was almost evening again when Bigman finally stood back and looked at the work with satisfaction.

"Done!" he sighed. "Now it's all a matter of your being fast enough, Emmet. We wish you luck!"

Loden attempted to smile in response but his face seemed to be paralyzed for the moment. He could see himself making his way among the motionless, prostrate robots. He imagined himself taking hold of the power switch and pushing it upward. He knew that when he turned to flee the robots would rise up and cut him off from freedom.

"Okay, Doc," he answered somewhat hoarsely. "In the meantime you'd better put as much distance between yourself and the station as you possibly can."

They went out of the building. There was nothing more to say. The other three retreated to the gate in the outer wall. Even that gave them a head start on the robots which could save their lives.

Loden would not have this head start.

When he finally came to the entrance of the power station, his mouth was

completely dry. Suddenly he wondered if he'd have the nerve to even accomplish his assignment. Would he have the courage and strength to raise that switch, only meters away from the robots?

In the entrance, Loden took one look back at the outside world. Was he staring at things past? He turned away abruptly. By now the other three should have reached the scrub woods. The Snoofs had moved Albright into a larger cave.

Loden heard his footsteps echoing from the walls. Since the structure had no windows or other openings, he had to grope his way through the darkness. But he knew that as soon as he gripped the power switch these rooms would again be flooded with artificial light. He bumped against a machine and paused. The thought came to him that it was highly possible they had not tuned the transmitter correctly, and in that case what he was doing would be in vain. As he moved around the machine he thought that perhaps he would never learn whether or not the whole thing had succeeded.

He expected to die here but it would have been easier for him to activate the power station if he knew for certain that the ships of the Solar Fleet would soon be landing on Fossil. As he finally climbed over the motionless forms of the robots toward his goal he knew that only his pride would drive him to place the switch back in its original position. His pride would not permit him to go back to Bigman and ask him to pick out somebody else for this job. It seemed that Bigman had acted as if he was doing him a great favor or honor by choosing him. Loden laughed aloud to himself. Actually it was strange how differently he was assessed by various people.

He forced his thoughts back to the task at hand. Now he knew he must not be diverted from it. His out stretched hands encountered the wall containing the control panels. He recoiled instinctively from the sudden contact. His knees trembled as he forced himself along the wall. The palms of his hands were sweating. Then one hand closed over the master switch. He sensed instantly what it was, and he was startled by his certainty that this was what he sought.

"Well, Emmet . . . ?" he muttered softly.

The sound of his voice dwindled away into the darkness. He stood there listening for a moment. It was almost as in his dream. The switch lever seemed to be terribly heavy. Maybe it couldn't be moved back, he thought. He wished that it was true, even though that would ruin all their plans. But at the moment he was thinking mainly of the robots. A second after activating the power switch, they would start moving.

He stood there for several seconds in the darkness. Then with a lunge, he flipped the switch back in place.

Brilliant light flooded around him. He stood against the wall panel, momentarily frozen with the lever still gripped in his hand. Then the robots began to stir and Loden started to run.

He knew he had to be fast to survive – faster than he had ever been all his life.

*

Atlan looked thoughtfully over Rhodan's shoulder at the plastic strip which the latter had placed on the chart table. From the other end of the table, Claudrin also studied it gravely.

"Somehow I get the impression," said Atlan, "that this is a bit too mysterious. It could be that somebody is trying to kid us."

The Epsalian agreed in rumbling tones. "Obviously that distress call was sent out to, divert our attention from something else. The real mystery, however, is why it was only transmitted four times before it was suddenly interrupted."

Rhodan spread out a star chart in front of the other two men. "Let's start over again," he said patiently. "A few minutes ago we received this message through relay station FS-491. This was in response to our general order to all stations that all hypercom traffic of the slightest suspicious nature should be passed on to the *THEODORICH*." Rhodan's deeply tanned hands smoothed out the chart. "According to calculations made by FS-491, we have to assume that the message came from the outer fringe of the galaxy." He made a mark on the chart. "From here, in fact," he said.

Claudrin's massive upper torso bent over the table, almost threatening to buckle it under him. "The only star registered there doesn't seem to amount to much," he said.

Rhodan checked the stellar data marked on the chart and opened a catalogue. "Here it is," he said after a few moments, and he read the catalog number. "The star has no proper name. It has two small planets that we seem to know nothing about--not even their orbital data."

Atlan tapped the table top with his knuckles. "Perry, that system is more than 12000 light years from our present position. I can't imagine who would be living there."

"It's quite a riddle," Rhodan admitted. "There's been no recent report of a

lost ship.”

“We can’t even make a guess at who the sender might be,” complained Claudrin. “I’m sorry sir but I still have my suspicions about this.”

“Your suspicion is no doubt justified,” Rhodan conceded. “Still, I don’t think this is a trap. Somebody there is in distress, and that somebody knows the Solar Fleet’s call frequency well enough to call us for help.”

“What do you want to do about it, Perry?” asked Atlan.

Rhodan slowly folded the star chart. “Everything that happens along the rim of the galaxy is of special interest to us,” he explained. “I believe we can respond to that message by dispatching a squadron into that system immediately. Inasmuch as the preparations for our expedition have been taken care of, I suggest that we take a personal hand in the affair.”

A strange expression came over Claudrin’s leathery face. It was still obvious that he doubted the validity of the distress call, but he remained silent. He was well aware that Rhodan had often moved in the right direction on the basis of an intuitive decision. So why, he asked himself, should it be any different this time?

Approximately one hour later a formation of 12 super battleships took off from Arkon 3 under the personal command of Perry Rhodan. Its destination was a small salmon-red sun on the edge of the Milky Way.

8.

THE DOCTOR'S DILEMMA

Dr. Bigman raised his arm. They had come to a stop in a small clearing. With a groan, Shawlee leaned back against a tree trunk.

Bergmann was still panting. "Do you think we've run far enough?" he asked.

"It will be dark soon," answered the cyberneticist. "It would be foolish to keep running during the night because we could possibly run in circles. Besides, I believe we've put enough distance between ourselves and the robots."

"Do you think Emmet was able to turn the power on?" asked Shawlee.

"Of course!" replied Bigman with conviction. "Let's hope he was also able to get away."

"How long will it be before the ships of the Fleet get here?" queried Bergmann. "That is, if our signal reached anybody at all." It was obvious in the tone of his voice that he didn't believe he would ever see the Terran battle spheres land on Fossil.

"They could be here as early as tomorrow," Bigman told him.

Shawlee looked up at the sky where the shadows of night were already looming. "Where are we going to make camp?" he asked.

Bigman inspected their surroundings. They did not know if there were any predatory night beasts in this area. He decided on the tree that Shawlee was leaning against. It would be safer to stay off the ground. "We'll climb into that tree," he concluded.

They were three tired and lonely men as they climbed into the dubious sanctuary of the branches. Their faces haggard and lined with the signs of exhaustion.

*

Since Loden himself was a cyberneticist he knew that the positronicon needed practically no start-up time to adjust itself to the new situation. In spite of this he was surprised at the swift recovery of the robots. At the same time he realized that the short time would seriously limit the number

of repeats they would get from their distress call. It was even possible that the master brain had not even allowed a single message to get out.

Fear spurred his legs into greater speed. As he ran past the robots and saw out of the corners of his eyes that they were beginning to move, he ducked instinctively because he expected to be fired at immediately. It seemed a miracle to him that he was able to make the turn into the front part of the building. Here he took every advantage of the shelter offered by the machinery looming in his path.

Even before he had reached the exit he saw an error in their plan. He wondered if Dr. Bigman had thought of the fact that the robots here in the power station were not the only ones on the base. Loden had to consider the possibility that the brain might have also mustered out other robots who would be able to block the exit gate at the wall.

He felt that he would not get out of the stronghold alive he was trapped. Behind him came his pursuers while another group of them would no doubt be waiting for him at the wall. Nevertheless he kept on running. There was one last chance open for him. The central brain had not yet discovered the tunnel. Maybe he could crawl through it without being seen. He dashed out of the building, already panting from his exertions.

Outside there were still no robots in evidence. As fast as his legs could carry him he crossed the open area. The little Snoof had camouflaged the entrance to the shaft so cleverly that he almost missed it. With one last jump he threw himself into the hole and the light covering of Earth and leaves crashed under his weight. Breathing strenuously, he threw himself to the ground and pressed his heated face against the cool earth.

After briefly catching his breath he turned around and cautiously peered out of the tunnel. He was just in time to see the pursuers emerge from the building. Logically, they turned in the direction of the wall--which gave him at least a breather. Nevertheless he couldn't just lie there and celebrate. Sooner or later the positronicon would order the robots to make a thorough search of the base because it would have to come to the inevitable conclusion that Loden was still inside the station.

With trembling hands he attempted to conceal the entrance again but he was not an expert at this type of work. All he could do was crawl through the tunnel to escape. While en route it occurred to him to knock down the supporting beams behind him so as to make it more difficult for the robots to track him. As he crawled along he didn't dare think of being discovered. It didn't take much imagination to envision how they would extract him from the excavation.

He finally forced himself to be calm. False haste was not the answer. He found out that he could make the best headway by supporting himself on his elbows and pulling himself forward in a belly crawl. Each time he passed any supporting beams, he kicked them down with his feet. Some of them refused to yield but a larger part of the tunnel caved in behind him as he progressed. He hoped that the cave-ins were not too evident on the surface. He was gradually bathed in sweat but he worked himself onward persistently.

It would be an ironic fate if the robots were waiting for him at the other end of the shaft. Just the thought of it almost tempted him to just lie where he was. However, when he clambered into the open there was no one to be seen. It was almost dark. When he glanced back at the stronghold he realized that he had won a victory that he would never have thought possible.

For a moment he entertained the idea of going to the Snoofs and having them conceal him like Albright. But then he shook his head in rejection. That would expose the furry creatures to danger unnecessarily.

He felt weary but not discouraged. Changing his direction he went toward the forest of underbrush where the night creatures were already tuning up for their plaintive nocturnal concert.

*

In spite of his stiffened joints, Jens Bergmann climbed out of the branches and jumped to the ground. The other two men had already abandoned their uncomfortable roosts and were gathering certain tree fruits which the snoofs had indicated as being palatable. They had a tart taste but were edible.

“Good morning!” Bigman called out to him in an unusually friendly tone. “We didn’t know if you were asleep or in hibernation.”

Bergmann gave him an uncertain smile because he didn’t know how he should react to the little man’s cheery mood. Without saying anything he joined them in their search for food and they ate together in silence. Bergmann felt he would have enjoyed a bath even more. The layer of filth covering his body was becoming more intolerable with each passing hour. It was as if they had taken a vast step backwards in the stages of evolution.

When they had finished their spartan meal, Shawlee climbed the tree to have a look around. He signaled to them reassuringly. The robots had not yet picked up their trail. Bigman glanced up at the sky which was heavily

overcast this morning. That could mean rain. Such unfavorable weather could place an added burden on their weakened physical condition. He decided they should get underway again. It would be unsafe for them to remain in one place too long.

“Let’s go on farther,” he said aloud.

But Bergmann suddenly stood still and listened. “Do you hear that, Doc?” he asked.

The little man also listened and finally heard the sound. It became easily discernible. Something was coming towards them through the woods. They could hear the crackling of twigs and branches. Bigman held his breath.

“An animal maybe?” whispered Shawlee.

“Quickly!” exclaimed the scientist. “Get under cover!”

They hurried behind the same tree in which they had spent the night as it was just on the edge of the clearing. The sounds were approaching rapidly, and once Bigman thought he heard a groan.

Then a figure stumbled into the open space.

Bigman’s eyes widened in surprise. He jumped out from behind the tree and ran toward the newcomer. “Emmet!” he cried out. “Emmet!”

Loden stared at him out of blood-rimmed eyes. His face was scratched and blooded. His hands were also a lacerated mess. At first he didn’t seem to recognize Bigman, but finally he staggered hoarsely. “It was impossible to keep going in any one direction.” He closed his eyes from exhaustion. Then he added quickly: “They’re behind me, Doc!”

Before Bigman could say anything he heard the pack of robots coming through the woods. He grasped Loden’s arm and pulled him along.

“No use!” Loden blurted out. “They’ll catch us anyway!”

*

Perry Rhodan leaned closer to the viewscreen. There was no sign of his inner excitement on his composed features. He spoke to Atlan. “That’s the stronghold we detected when we penetrated the atmosphere. I might almost venture to say that it is reminiscent of the structural style of Mechanica.”

“But who could have sent a hypercom message from here?” asked Atlan.

“That we’ll find out as soon as we’ve landed.”

A few minutes later the super battleship landed on the surface of the alien planet. Above the stronghold circled 11 other warships with their gun

turrets aimed threateningly at the station.

“Into your combat suits!” came Rhodan’s order. “Activate your defense screens.”

The giant ship had landed within about 200 meters of the alien base. Even in that proximity to the extensive ground installations, the vast sphere of Arkon steel loomed gigantically. It was a deliberate demonstration of military strength and was intended to discourage any potential hostilities.

In spite of this, when the men emerged from the ship they were attacked by the robots.

Rhodan instructed the troops: “Spare the buildings from any unnecessary damage. Curtius, lead your specialists into the station. Locate the central control so that we can deactivate these robots.”

The robot resistance was no special obstacle to these battle-tested commandos. It only required a few minutes for the advance fighters to penetrate the stronghold. It wasn’t long after that before the main power station was discovered, and Rhodan had the base shut down.

Together with Atlan he entered the conquered area.

“It’s actually another Mechanica base,” said the Arkonide. He frowned in puzzlement. “But we still don’t know who sent out that distress call. It certainly wasn’t the robots.”

“It will all be unraveled,” replied Rhodan laconically.

They started their investigation of the station. In less than an hour the specialists made the same discovery that had so excited Dr. Bigman before them. It was very gratifying to Rhodan to receive the report concerning the Laurin detection device. However, Atlan did not seem to share his elation.

“All this seems to be too much of a good thing,” he grumbled. “Jefe may be right. Somebody could be baiting a trap for us here.”

But Rhodan was not to be diverted from the facts as hand. In the meantime hypercom dispatches were sent out calling for research ships, which were assigned the task of making a thorough investigation of the base. Hardly another day would pass before the detection device would be under close scientific scrutiny on Earth.

Rhodan was quite confident. Once they had found out who on this planet had sent out the distress call, they could proceed with the evaluation of their discovery at their leisure.

When they came out of the woods, Bergmann looked up and shouted in awe. "A mammoth ship! Thank God it arrived in time to shut down the base!

"It's the flagship of the Solar Fleet, Doc," said Bergmann. "That's the *THEODORICH*."

"Do you think Rhodan is here personally?" asked Shawlee.

"That's what it looks like," answered Bergmann.

Dr. Bigman had come to a standstill. His men looked back at him impatiently.

"What are you still waiting for, Doc?" Loden asked him.

Bigman glared at him coldly. "You mind your own business, Emmet!" he said sharply.

Loden was startled. Apparently the little man had gone back to his old crabbiness.

"You can't just stand here forever!" argued Bergmann.

Bigman stubbornly refused to give an answer, but that was when Loden began to laugh even the little man's angry protests could not stop him from laughing. Loden had seen the answer to the riddle.

In the moment of his triumph, even a man of Dr. Bigman's fortitude could not bring himself to face the Administrator of the Solar Imperium in tattered underwear.

THE END

A small team of Terran technicians has made galactic history. They have discovered a detection device that will eliminate the menace of the Laurins.

But the Laurins' old enemy, the Posbis, still represent a deadly threat to all organic life in the Milky Way.

However, one day in April 2114 it seems the situation might change when a space tramp brings a mysterious message.

THE ROBOT INVITATION *is the title of the next Perry Rhodan adventure, written by the master of SF, K. H. Scheer – and for "Scheer" delight he lets Atlan tell the tale!*